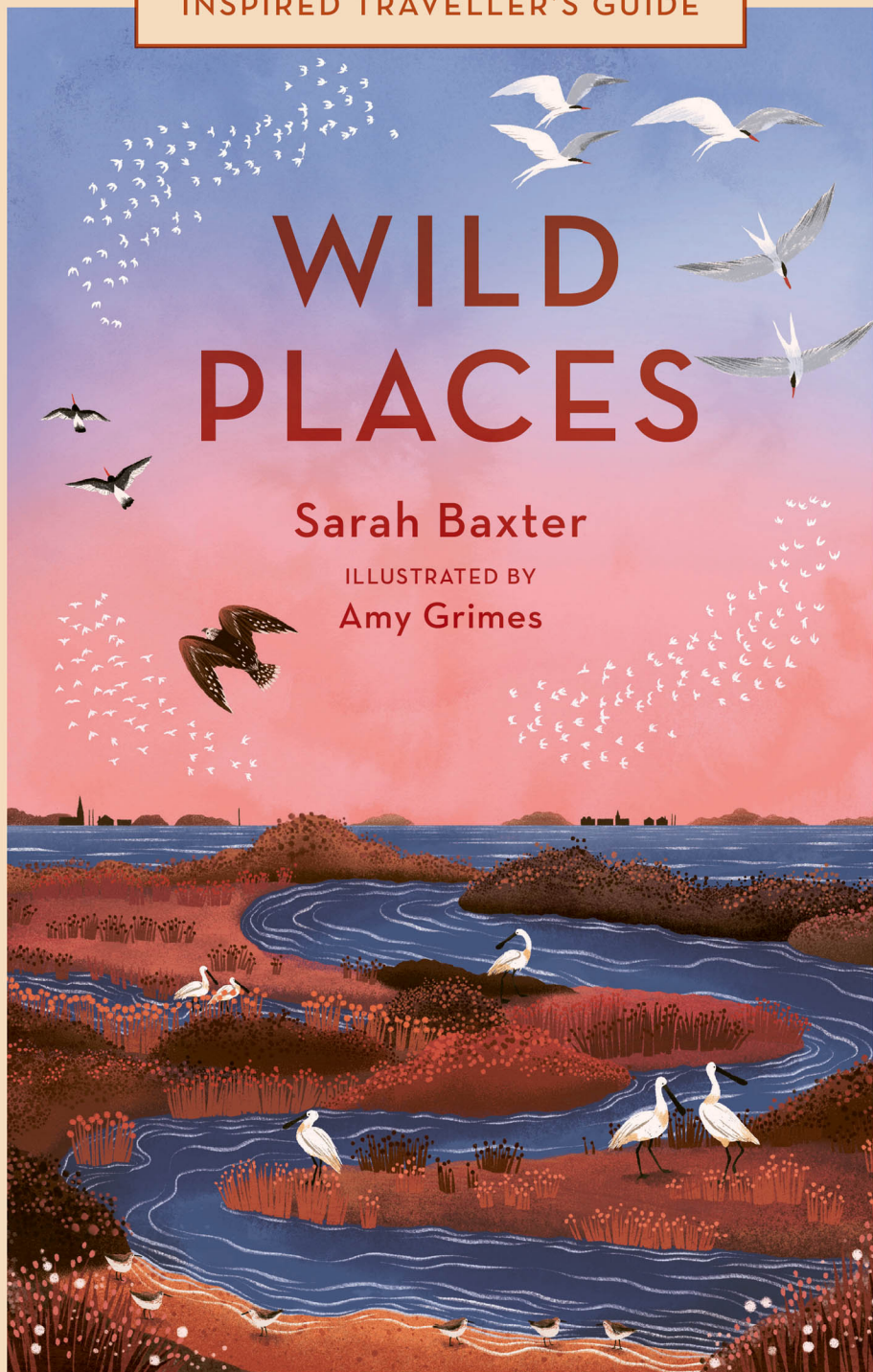


INSPIRED TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

WILD PLACES

Sarah Baxter

ILLUSTRATED BY
Amy Grimes



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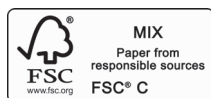
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INTRODUCTION

'WE NEED the tonic of wildness,' wrote American naturalist Henry David Thoreau. 'At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable,

that land and sea be indefinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.'

Thoreau knew a thing or two about wild places. We don't just like them. We need them; we need their scale, their breadth, their drama, their enigma. They can be a balm and a solace; an escape or a returning; a best friend; an inner cleanse. And they can remind us of our unimportance in the world. For really, despite all the advances of human civilisation, we've yet to come up with anything to rival the majesty of a mountain, the explosive palette of the setting sun, the haunting song of the humpback whale, the iridescent sheen on the back of a tansy beetle.

But what is wild? Few corners have been left unconquered on this planet. Truly pristine wilderness – untrodden, unmapped, unknown – is rare indeed. However, that doesn't mean we've tamed it all, or that places touched by human hands can't still feel wonderfully untouched. A wild place is somewhere that speaks to us on a different level. A landscape that seeps into our deepest recesses; provokes wonder, awe or fear. A place where we're not in charge, not really. A location where, in the shift of a tectonic plate or the flap of a butterfly's wing, the ground could erupt beneath us, the mud suck us down, the predator pounce in for the kill.

That said, the wild places chosen here all have some sort of human tale to tell. Many are woven into the folklore of those

who've made them home; places laced with long-standing legends of bears that are sacred (page 116), pools that lead to the underworld (page 124) and mountain tops that are the abodes of yetis and gods (page 90). We cannot truly understand all parts of nature but, over the millennia, our stories have helped us to live within it.

In some cases, we've made a down-right mess of this wonderful world – but we're seeking to make amends. There are growing numbers of successful rewilding projects, providing rays of hope in the gloom; environments that have suffered at our hands that are beginning to revive – from constrained rivers now allowed to run free (page 10) to the inspiring transformation of a former corridor of war (page 36). Maybe, when given space, these places can be reborn better than before?

So, within these pages, we'll venture into a variety of untamed regions. Some are 'wild' thanks to their remoteness, adrift in the furthest oceans or tucked into the deepest bush. In some, it is the life that is wild – places stalked, slithered and swum by a marvellous, multitudinous menagerie. Some places are battered by wild weather, making them hostile in the extreme (though often both animals and humans have tried to find a way). Some are wild in the wackiest sense – places of the unmatched peculiar, where the terrain fizzles or bends or squelches not quite how you might expect.

On this virtual journey we'll dip into the most vivid seas, where the coral and fishes dazzle like underwater rainbows. We'll skirt the edges of enormous deserts to stare across dunes that undulate to the horizon and beyond. We'll take a walk along an old iron curtain, where miles and miles of death and destruction have been turned into life and hope. And we'll visit far-distant islands that, with their unique beasts and birds, managed to alter the course of human understanding, causing us to question the very nature of existence.

Ably accompanied by evocative illustrations, which conjure the essence of each place, you can travel to the ends of the earth without leaving the comfort of your couch. You can become an adventurer in your own armchair, travelling from the icy cold of the poles (page 140) to the stickiest, sweatiest jungle (page 74) to the shadows of the highest peaks (page 90) in just the flick of a page.

This book is limited to just 25 wild places but, of course, there are many, many more. Even though we humans have managed to

transform, in some way, 70 per cent of all ice-free land on the planet, there is still a lot of wilderness left; there are still so many fascinating sites, each unique. Indeed, with more space I would have taken you on a virtual plunge into brisk-and-beautiful Baikal, the oldest and deepest of lakes in Siberia's untamed taiga; around 1,700 endemic species are found here, as well as the indigenous Buryat, who consider Baikal their Sacred Sea. For a really weird wild show, we might have detoured to Ethiopia's Danakil Depression, arguably the planet's hottest, lowest and least hospitable spot. In this faraway alien landscape, volcanoes glow and gurgle, molten lakes boil, the earth is cracked and rippled, and the rocks and pools clash in garish reds, yellows and greens; yet it's also the 'Cradle of Humanity', where some of the earliest hominid fossils have been found. Or we might have found unexpected wildness within the city limits: in Kenya's Nairobi National Park you can see black rhino, lions, giraffes and cheetahs grazing and lazing before a backdrop of sky-scraping steel and glass.

Because, no matter how much we screw up this planet, Mother Nature finds a way. And, for the sake of our sanity, our souls, our very survival, long may she continue.



Where? Cumbria, England

What? Glacial valley on the Lake District's edge where the river once more runs free

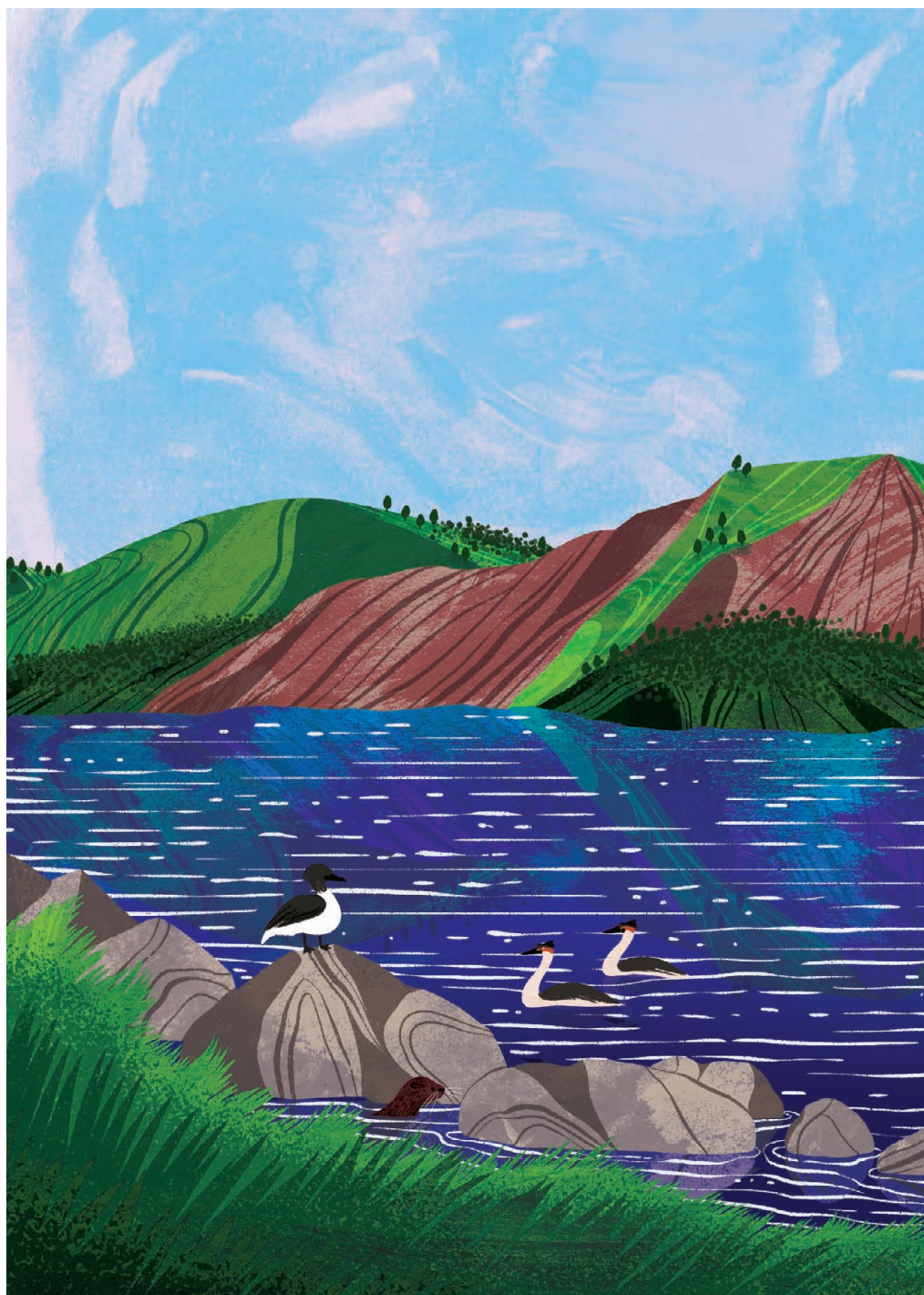
ENNERDALE

THIS VALLEY had long been shaped by the hands of man. But now, left largely to her own devices, Mother Nature is wresting back control. Unruly native tree roots are rising amid the orderly plantations, an arboreal insurrection that brings new colours and textures, changes the tone, softens the lines. The formidable uplands are once again flecked with rare wildflowers with names that read like poetry: mountain eyebright, alpine catchfly, scrubby cinquefoil, starry saxifrage. And the unkempt River Liza runs as it pleases, cold, crisp, feral, free. Yes, this place is flourishing after its semi-divorce from humankind. It is sometimes calm, sometimes chaotic but it is always as it wishes. It is finding itself once more . . .

The entirety of the English Lake District has a rare, wild beauty. Carved from the ancient Cumbrian bedrock by a succession of glaciations, the resulting landscape is high drama indeed. Wide U-shaped valleys swoop between rugged, pointy peaks and smooth, broad-shouldered fells, old-growth forest sits beneath gusty moors, roads snake and shinny up steep hold-your-breath passes and mirror-like waters, meres and tarns are scattered all about – some are island-dotted and expansive, others almost too tiny to map, glittering amid the mountains.

Of course, these topographical theatrics haven't gone unnoticed. This is England's busiest national park, and honeypot spots such as Windermere and Coniston heave in season, tourists thronging to buy slabs of Kendal mint cake and hop aboard vintage paddle steamers. But Ennerdale is different; an outlier in many ways.







Measuring around 12km (7 miles) long, it's hidden away on the park's northwestern fringe, where the fells start to fall to the Irish Sea. It is one of the Lake District's least-visited major valleys, in most part because it's the only one not ringed by a public road (road access is limited to the valley's western end). Indeed, there's barely any development here, only a handful of buildings. There's plenty of wildlife though, from goosanders, grebes and goldcrests to marsh fritillary butterflies, otters and red squirrels. But there's almost no light pollution – lakeside Low Gillerthwaite is a designated Dark Sky Discovery Site.

Instead, its peaceful, sweeping slopes are blanketed with crags and heath, mixed woodland and juniper shrubs – Ennerdale means 'juniper valley' in ancient Norse. It is dominated by an arc of striking peaks: Pillar, Kirk Fell, Scoat Fell, Great Gable. And within this mountainous embrace lies Ennerdale Water, a clear, deep, glacial lake fed by the braided channels of the rambling River Liza. It's quite the sight, and certainly impressed local-born Romantic poet William Wordsworth, who once noted that anyone who makes the long trek to Ennerdale will 'discover a vista which cannot fail to strike the most indifferent observer with astonishment and pleasure'.

These days Ennerdale is officially 'wild'. In 2002, the Wild Ennerdale project was established, a commitment by local stakeholders to 'allow the evolution of Ennerdale as a wild valley'. The post-First World War boom in commercial-scale planting of fast-growing, high-yield exotic coniferous trees across the country's upland moors changed the make-up of Ennerdale; this new rewilding is an attempt to redress the balance. It's a largely hands-off approach that allows the valley to recover at its own pace, at the whim of the weather and seasons. For instance, only two years after Wild Ennerdale's launch, a savage storm whipped through, uprooting around 27,000 trees – most of them non-native conifers. This opened the door for nature itself to create a more biodiverse landscape, with no human intervention required.

Other alterations have been more purposeful. Native species such as hazel, aspen, oak and Scots pine are being planted to replace the larch forests decimated by an outbreak of fungus-like *Phytophthora ramorum*. The introduction of shaggy black Galloway cattle – nicknamed 'Ennerdale bears' – has encouraged a change in vegetation, due to the way they tramp and graze. And the decision not to dredge or install flood defences on the Liza leaves the river

able to flood and shift at will, altering the environment along with it. The Arctic char seem happy with this – the Liza is home to England's only migratory population of this Ice Age fish, and numbers have increased here since the project began.

So Ennerdale is evolving on its own, but not turning its back on people. That would be out of keeping, as there has been human habitation here for many millennia. The evidence can still be seen: for instance, at the lakeside site of a medieval bloomery, once used for smelting iron; at the ruins of the Gillerthwaite Longhouses, a nod to the farming community that lived here 600 years ago; at the enclosed settlement by the river, occupied during the Iron Age. These days, walkers are encouraged, and the Smithy Beck Trail from Bowness Knott links these ancient sites.

More challenging is the hike up Pillar – some say this outcrop (long believed unconquerable) is the spiritual home of rock climbing, after the first ascent by a local shepherd in 1824 kick-started interest in the sport. But perhaps the wildest pursuit in this wildest of valleys is the Ennerdale Horseshoe, a 36km (22 mile) circuit taking in all of the valley's major summits: Starling Dodd, Red Pike, High Crag and Haystacks, Green Gable, Great Gable, Caw Fell and Crag Fell – all the great guardians that look down on the valley and can never be tamed.

Where? Pembrokeshire, Wales

What? Remote, windswept
promontory thrusting into
the wild waves

STRUMBLE HEAD

PITY THE invaders who tried to land on this exposed, unyielding headland. There are no safe harbours, no welcoming bays or beaches. Just forbidding cliffs rearing straight up from a fearful froth and broil where currents converge and the sea swell is never the same twice. Many a ship has met a watery grave here – some 60 vessels in the 19th century alone. In places, basalt columns front these shores like a defending army; in others, safeguarding is left to the seals, which haul onto the shingle to give birth to their pups. At the tip of it all is a lighthouse, dazzling white, warning all comers of the dangers of this inhospitable, magnificent spot . . .

The Pembrokeshire Coast is an oddity. The only UK national park principally designated for its maritime landscape, and always hugging the sea, it is unusual in shape. At its widest point it stretches far enough inland to encompass the Preseli Hills; at its narrowest, though, it measures only 100m (300ft) across. However, it packs a dramatic diversity into even its most restricted spaces. This is a coastline of sea caves, rock stacks and folded and striated cliffs that betray the geology of eons; of wide estuaries, deep harbours and Blue Flag beaches; of outcrops and islets beloved by birds; of tiny fishing communities, pilgrimage sites and Neolithic remains.

Yet probably the wildest and most remote portion of this whole seashore is around Strumble Head, a promontory of igneous rock at the tip of the Pencaer Peninsula that marks the southern limit of Cardigan Bay. Here, vertiginous cliffs loom up to 140m (460ft) high; big views reach north to the Llŷn Peninsula, south to St David's and – on a clear day – all the way to Ireland. At the end



of the headland, on the tiny just-offshore isle of Ynys Meicel, sits Strumble Head lighthouse. Built in 1908 and automated since 1980, its warning flashes can be seen for 48km (26 nautical miles).

Indeed, there are no permanently inhabited buildings here now, though the scattered archaeological remains – a Bronze Age round barrow, two Iron Age forts, field systems of unknown date – suggest this hasn't always been the case. Also secreted amid Pencaer's bracken, heather, gorse and cowslips are abandoned lookout posts left over from the Second World War, one of which has been converted to a hide; from here, gulls, ravens, crows, peregrines and a range of migrating birds might be spotted battling against the unfettered wind, while porpoises and dolphins like to frolic in the waves.

A little to the south sits what must be one of the country's most dramatically sited youth hostels, a whitewashed cottage dangling above the sheer chasm-like bowl of Pwll Deri Bay (Pool of Oaks); also here is a memorial to Pembrokeshire poet Dewi Emrys, inscribed with a couplet from one of his best-loved poems: 'And these are the thoughts that will come to you / When you sit above Pwll Deri'.

Another memorial lies on the north side of the peninsula, at Carregwastad, commemorating the last – and arguably most inept – invasion of Britain. One night in February 1797, a disorganised cohort of French Revolutionary troops came ashore at this inauspicious spot and attempted an attack. They looted a few scattered farms but were quickly and roundly defeated by a band of stick-wielding locals; it is said that Jemima Nichols, a cobbler's wife from nearby Fishguard, single-handedly captured 12 of the soldiers armed only with a pitchfork.

The entirety of the Pembrokeshire coast is ringed by a national trail, which is the only way to access the whole of Strumble Head. The walking here is some of the trail's most testing. There are no facilities; there's no shelter from the elements. It's just you and the seabirds, the tortoiseshell and small blue butterflies, the Welsh mountain ponies grazing the vibrant heath, the whistle of the wind and the roar of the sea.



Where? Outer Hebrides, Scotland

What? Abandoned islands at the very edge of the world

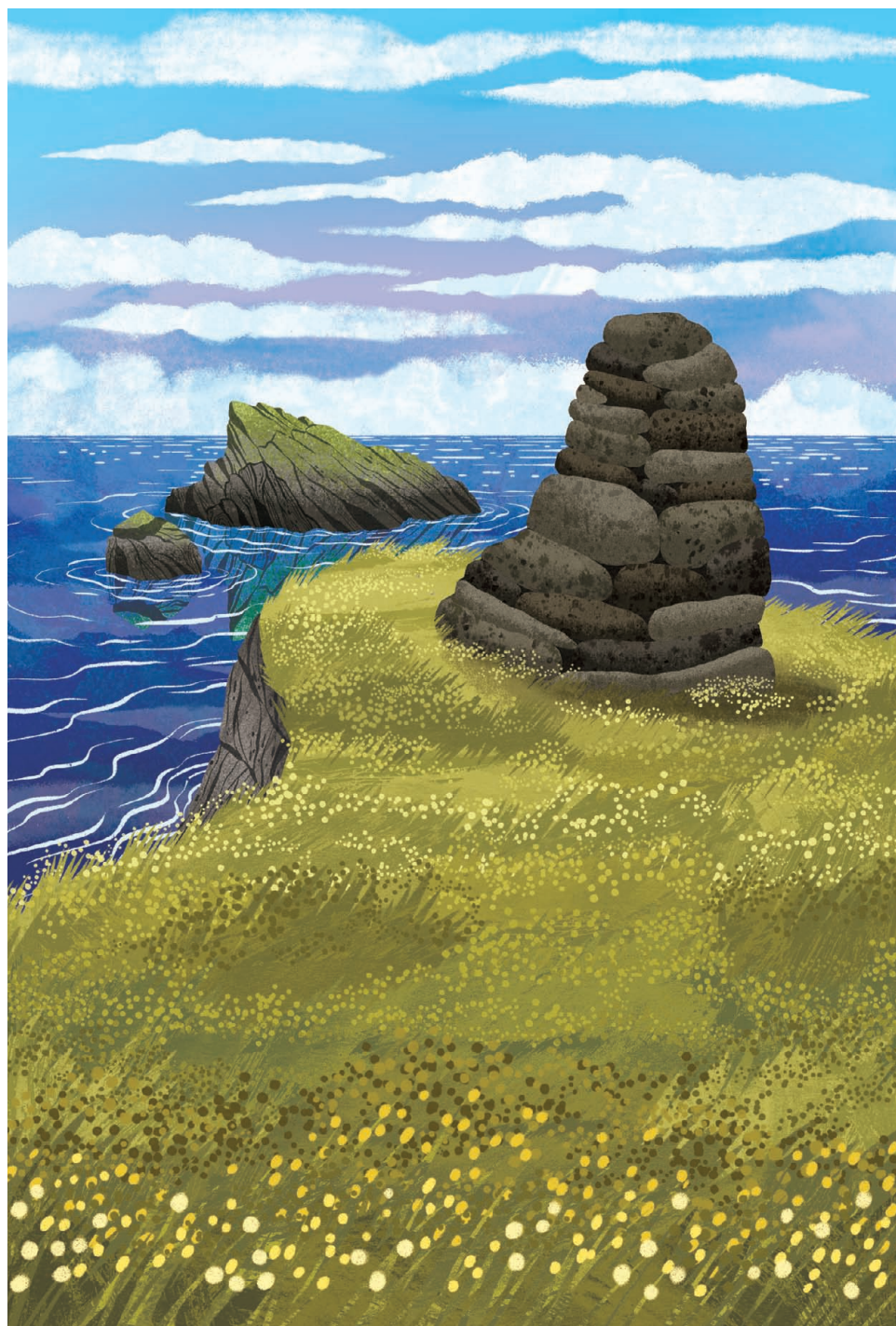
ST KILDA

THEY SAY the wind on St Kilda can be so strong it blows the sheep clear over the cliffs; that storms can rage with such sound and fury, you could be left deaf for a week; that the ocean swell might be stirred to the

height of a double-decker bus; that, more often than not, the skies will drizzle, lash, bucket, chuck it and teem. No, there is nothing subtle or delicate about this sharp-edged archipelago at the fringes of civilisation. There never has been. Born of ancient upheaval, it's a place of hard knocks, where only the tough survive. And even they might not be tough enough ...

UNESCO-listed St Kilda is stranded in the North Atlantic, 65-odd km (40 miles) west of Benbecula, at the outermost of the Outer Hebrides. It's Scotland's most westerly outpost and one of the remotest reaches of the British Isles – next stop to the west is Canada. Comprising Hirta (the main island), Boreray, Dun and Soay, plus the mighty sea stacks of Levenish, Stac an Armin and Stac Lee, the archipelago is all that remains above sea level of a long-extinct volcano that was active some 60 million years ago. In the eons since, the exposed granite, gabbro and dolerite have been eroded into this: a haunting relic where emerald slopes are backed by angry, angular shards that simply fall away into battleship seas, including, at 426m (1,398ft), some of Europe's highest sea cliffs.

The birds don't seem to mind the harsh environment. On the contrary, they thrive in it. St Kilda's towering rock faces are home to gannets, guillemots, razorbills, petrels, great skua, kittiwakes and Atlantic puffins, a brouhaha of almost a million seabirds, filling the







skies with their cries. And, for many centuries, filling the bellies of the people who sought to survive here.

Because, incredibly, this wildest of places was inhabited for at least 4,000 years – Bronze Age treasures such as Skail knives, hoe blades and shards of pottery have been unearthed to prove it. Living on Hirta was made just about feasible by the presence of freshwater springs; some say the archipelago's name is a corruption of the Old Norse word *childa*, meaning 'well'.

The earliest written records date from the late 17th century: in the 1690s the population was recorded as 180 individuals, all renting their plots from a landlord on the Isle of Skye. The hardy settlers kept sheep (the tough, agile Soay breed) and grew crops such as oats and potatoes as the weather permitted, but their main sustenance was the meat and eggs of seabirds. The fittest, ablest men would lower themselves down cliffs via ropes or climb up the sea stacks in order to catch and collect them. According to the 1764 census, residents consumed 36 eggs and 18 birds each day.

The islanders lived on 'main street', originally in a row of thatched chimney-less 'blackhouses' – so named because their peat fires tarnished everything. These were later replaced by simple slate-roofed cottages. Yet life didn't become any easier and increasing contact with the rest of the world lured islanders away, looking for an easier path. In the 1920s the crops failed multiple times and the St Kildans nearly starved. Finally, following a vote, the remaining 36 islanders – and most of their 1,500 sheep – were evacuated on 29 August 1930.

Gone but not forgotten. Visiting the island now, on the occasions when sea conditions permit, it's possible to walk around this abandoned community. To enter the ruined houses, each containing a slate that records the name of the last family to live there, and the date they finally left. To investigate the slope-scattered *cleitean*, the unique stone huts where food was dried and stored. And to climb up Conachair, Hirta's highest point, to look over it all: down to the ultimately unsustainable settlement, over the terrifying cliffs, and out to those looming sea stacks, a-whirl with birds that have the islands to themselves once more.



Where?	Provence & Languedoc, France
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What?	Vast, ethereal wetland where white horses roam free
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CAMARGUE

WILD PLACE? Wild West – that’s what they call it: the Wild West of France. A strange, sunbaked, windswept triangle between rivers, where *gardians* (the region’s traditional cowboys) still drive herds of semi-wild bulls and horses; where shallow lakes blush with pink-tinged algae and marshes erupt in mass upheavals of birds; where the reed-rippling flatlands seem to stretch to the horizon and beyond. Completely captivating, not a little disorientating; more water than soil, more sky than ground, more island than mainland, more mirage than reality ...

The Camargue is unlike anywhere else in France – it’s where the country deliquesces, succumbing to water. A designated Regional Nature Park, this 100,000-plus hectare (250,000 acre) wetland shimmers on the shores of the Mediterranean, inside the Rhône delta, cupped between two of its arms: to the west, the Petit Rhône flows into the Med at the fishing village of Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer; to the east lies the Grand Rhône. The low-lying nature of the land – no point of the Camargue is more than 4m (13ft) above sea level, some areas sink well below it – and the constant ebb and flow of both the sea and the river have made this a place of flux for centuries, a topography in constant evolution. Hard to pin down. Though humankind has tried.

The earliest-known settlements here date back to around the 6th century BC, when Neolithic tribes would take salt from the lagoons, which dried up each summer. It was also a strategic location for the Greeks when they founded Marseille, a little to the east. When the Romans arrived, the northern Camargue was still







forest, which they felled to build ships and grow crops. Later, the area was utilised for salt production by Cistercian and Benedictine monks, who built monasteries on mounds in the marshes. By the 17th century, wealthy merchants had started to construct larger *mas* (ranches) around the fringes. But, although people were exerting their influence on the Camargue, the delta continued to shape and shift regardless, still largely wild.

Advances in technology brought greater change. The Rhône was dyked to protect the historic town of Arles and, in the 1850s, the installation of the *digue à la mer* (dyke to the sea) provided some protection from coastal erosion. Also, the development of an irrigation and drainage network has enabled some control over the environment, making it more suitable for such uses as salt harvesting and rice cultivation. But still, this is a landscape that will never quite be tamed.

Walking, driving or cantering across the Camargue now, it certainly feels far from domesticated. The park is an intricate lacework of shallow, brackish lakes (the largest being the Étang du Vaccarès), sand spits and salt pans, bird-flocked marshes and deserted beaches, criss-crossed by small, empty lanes. Outside the towns there is scant development. The only buildings to dot the wetlands are the *cabanes* of the *gardians*, simple thatched huts constructed with their backs turned to the mistral wind and with bulls' horns tacked onto the roof, to repel lightning and evil spirits. No, in the Camargue you're more likely to see wildlife than people. Species such as boar, beavers, pond turtles, water snakes, mosquitoes and many breeds of bird all live here. The latter includes thousands of pale-pink flamingos, which stilt-walk the salt ponds on their spindly legs, searching for shrimp.

And then there are the white Camargue horses. Thought to be one of the oldest breeds in the world, these small, stocky steeds are born brown or black and turn white when they're around four years old. They've long had a reputation for toughness, and were much sought after by Roman chariot racers and medieval knights. Like the Camargue itself, these animals – all owned these days – are no longer completely free. But to see a herd galloping through the shallows, kicking up spray, forelocks flying in the breeze, encapsulates the whole region's enduring wild spirit.



Where? Lapland, northern Sweden

What? Near-endless Arctic wilderness, heartland of the Sámi people

SÁPMI

SWEDISH LAPLAND, Finnish Lapland, northern Norway, Russia's Kola Peninsula . . . country borders might be drawn here but, really, Europe's uppermost extremes are not easy to contain. The scale of Sápmi

– also known as Lapland – is just too great. Its ancient culture too nomadic. Its nature simply too wild. This beautiful, brumal back o' beyond lies largely above the Arctic Circle; it's an enormity that is variously sliced by valleys, snicked by sea fjords, licked by glaciers, rumped by mountains, streaked with rivers, swathed in berry-ripe tundra and cloaked in old-growth taiga forest. It is where the aurora borealis performs its strange, entrancing dance. Wildlife is rife. Roads are rare. People are few – but those who do live here, camping out under these ethereal skies, have the most interesting stories to share . . .

Even leaving aside its reach into other nations, the portion of Sápmi within Sweden is vast, encompassing more than a quarter of the country. And it's extreme. Summers can bring warm days, lake swims, mosquitoes and midnight sun. Winters are icy and snow-smothered, plunging well below zero and into permanent darkness – though those black skies are spangled by *Lodderáidaras* (the Milky Way) and, often, the northern lights. Sweden is also home to Sápmi's highest summit, 2,111 m (6,926 ft) Mount Kebnekaise, and three of its largest untamed rivers. It is a stronghold for species such as Arctic fox, elk, lynx, wolverine and brown bear. And it is home to around 20,000 Sámi, Europe's only officially recognised indigenous people.



Although their origins are not precisely known, it's thought the Sámi may have survived in this tough land since the last Ice Age. Historically they would cover huge distances on foot or on skis, hunting, fishing and following the great reindeer migrations. According to an old proverb, reindeer belong to the wind; nature is in charge of them, and herders never have total control over the number of animals they own. The Sámi would set up their *goahti* (tents), pick berries, carve tools from antlers, tell stories around the fire, then would move on with the herd. They might leave behind traces of their passing – it's possible to find evidence of ancient *árran* (fireplaces) or trapping pits – but little more: the Sámi philosophy is to tread only lightly on the land.

These days few Sámi live this way – it has become unsustainable in the 21st century. Now fences prevent free movement, dams make rivers too deep for crossing, forests are felled before the arboreal hanging lichens (vital food for reindeer in winter) have had time to grow. But, in the Lapponia World Heritage Area, traditions and nature cling on. This UNESCO-listed region of northern Sweden is the biggest (and one of the last remaining) areas in the world where the practice of moving livestock with the seasons still continues – an ancestral custom, dating back to the early stages in the economic and social development of humankind.

Covering some 9,400 square kilometres (3,630 square miles), including Padjelanta, Sarek, Muddus and Stora Sjöfallet National Parks, Lapponia is enormous, diverse and spectacular. There are areas where snow-covered summits loom over drumlins and valleys scored with ancient reindeer trails; there are sweeps of alpine moor and slopes cloaked with mountain birch, spruce and pine, including Sweden's biggest contiguous old-growth forests; there are endless wetlands, waterfalls, marshes and deep ravines; there is the Lake Lájtávrra Delta, surrounded by staggeringly high cliffs and strewn with sacred sites. Crucially, there are forage areas for large reindeer herds – around 50,000 of the animals live here, managed by 9 Sámi communities.

In order to make this tough way of life more viable, some Sámi families have started leading groups of visitors into their lands. It's possible to go trekking in the mountains in the summer (Lapponia has 440km/273 miles of marked trails, many more unmarked), to hunt for the aurora borealis in winter or to join the start of the reindeer migration in spring. Short tours, small steps, boundless wilderness.



Where? Germany

What? Deadly political divide
reimagined for nature

GREEN BELT

FROM DEATHLY divide to life line. Few would have foreseen that the dark, decades-long fracturing of a continent would give the earth such respite, foster such green shoots, see natural connections spring from

such grisly division. And yet, a ribbon of land once consigned to concrete, guns, barbed wire and border guards has been revitalised; it is now home to orchids and otters, wood grouse and wild cats, marsh fritillary butterflies, black storks, rare mosses. It is rivers rewilded, forests recovered, meadows more biodiverse, once-severed countries united by conservation. The fearsome frontier that few dared to cross – and where some died trying – is now a place of hope and renewal . . .

In 1945, at the close of the Second World War, a so-called iron curtain was drawn across the middle of Europe, which would divide the continent for nearly 40 years. Stretching from the Barents Sea, at the Russian–Norwegian border, right down to the shores of the Adriatic and the Black Sea, it began as a political and ideological fissure, separating the Soviet socialist-influenced East and the free-market-thinking West. But, over time, it became a physical boundary too: a long and near-impervious barricade of walls and wire fences, watchtowers, ditches, bunkers and booby traps.

Nowhere was the 'curtain' so heavily militarised as along *die Grenze*, the 'inner German border' that separated the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany). This line ran for almost 1,400km (870 miles) from the Baltic Sea to what was then Czechoslovakia, ploughing through villages, sundering communities,







tearing friends and families apart. On the GDR side especially, the fortifications were heavy and complex along the wall's entire length: a restricted zone, protective strip and outer fences were built behind the border, which was patrolled by 50,000 armed troops. Almost 700 towers were erected; 1.3 million mines were laid. It created a virtual no-man's-land – a fatal void that claimed the lives of many of those desperate enough to try to cross.

This was a deadly space for many, yes. But not so for wildlife. While the Cold War rumbled on, political tensions ran high and the world was in a state of flux, the environment along the line remained insulated from radical change. Development and most human disturbances in this narrow frontier ceased. Border areas were largely off-limits so no agriculture was practised, no shopping malls were built; people were kept away, either by fear, force or choice. Thus nature was permitted a break, able to revive, diversify and stretch along the divide, creating an almost continuous corridor of semi-wilderness from the Baltic to Bavaria. The area's 5,200-or-so species of flora and fauna – over 600 of which are considered endangered – were left to their own devices. The fortified fences provided little impediment either, with animals such as foxes and badgers simply tunnelling their way through.

The benefits that this brutal barrier was bringing to nature did not go unnoticed. The German Federation for the Environment and Nature Conservation (BUND) was created in 1975 and began recording the growing diversity of species and habitats within the 'death strip'. Specifically, it found that 90 per cent of several endangered bird species, such as whinchat and woodlark, preferred to breed inside the border zone and avoided farmland. In 1989, when *die Grenze* (and the Berlin Wall) finally fell, the German Green Belt project was born. Its task would be a formidable one: to turn this interminably long and ugly defensive network into the most unconventional of nature reserves.

Today the German Green Belt – or *Grünes Band Deutschland* – is a beaded necklace of rich, varied, vital conservation areas strung between land that has been intensively farmed. Much of the military paraphernalia has been dismantled, though some observation towers, memorials and fence sections still stand, providing poignant and important reminders of the past. Former customs officers, foresters and locals who bore witness to the

divide in action now lead guided tours. In places, old barracks have been transformed into hotels. But now nature is in charge.

And what a variety of nature. Because the Green Belt stretches so far, it encompasses a wide ecological gamut, from sea cliffs and dunes to lakes, riverbanks, ravines, moors and mountains, wildflower meadows, beech forests, quaking bogs, ponds, lagoons and heather-cloaked heath. Within these various environs, many species thrive. The coast is a haven for grey seals, goosander and migratory common cranes. Along the Elbe River there are breeding storks and soaring white-tailed eagles while, come winter, huge flocks of whooper swans fill the skies. Lynx have been successfully reintroduced to the caves and crevices of the Harz Mountains – a heavily defended landscape, once completely off-limits – and birch and pine trees are starting to sprout in land unintentionally tilled during the search for mines. Wild cats hide out in the woodlands of Eichsfeld, while the Franconian Forest harbours marten, deer and wild boar. Vogtland is a flourish of flower-flecked grasslands, birdlife and butterflies. On the border with Czechia, there are streams in which pearl mussels thrive.

The German Green Belt is still a work in progress. Some sections were destroyed following reunification, creating gaps along the line. But the hope is that these will be closed, so that the course of the iron curtain can be preserved both for history and for nature.

Where? The Netherlands

What? Expansive, biodiverse wetland that looks and feels different every day

WADDEN SEA

THE DUTCH have a singular relationship with water. And it all starts here, along this fluid, freestyling shore. It's less a coastline than a wide-screen epic, action-packed and adventurous, with a hint of danger and a

cast of millions – from seals to molluscs to thousands-strong flocks of birds. The boss on set is Mother Nature, directing the wind and the rise of the tides, sculpting the littoral lowlands, crafting the dunes, creating new gullies and isles. Each day sees a slightly different ending, the lie of the land and the mood of the skies never quite the same twice . . .

The UNESCO-listed Wadden Sea, which extends along the coasts of Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands, is the largest intertidal ecosystem in the world, where the processes of nature continue largely unhindered. The Dutch portion of this is protected within the Wadden Sea Conservation Area, between the Marsdiep inlet off Den Helder and the Dollard bay in Groningen. It's extremely young in geological terms, only emerging around 7,000 years ago, in the all-change aftermath of the last Ice Age. It's easily the wildest place remaining in the Netherlands, one of the planet's most densely populated countries. And it is wild indeed, a multi-faceted landscape of shape-shifting channels, seagrass meadows, sandbars and shoals, mussel beds, mudflats, salt marshes, estuaries, dunes and beaches, as well as five peaceful islands that shield the shallow Wadden Sea from the North Sea beyond.

It is a human landscape too. Enticed by the fertile soil, people started settling along this unpredictable shore from around 600 BC, beginning the long-standing man-versus-water tussle for which the

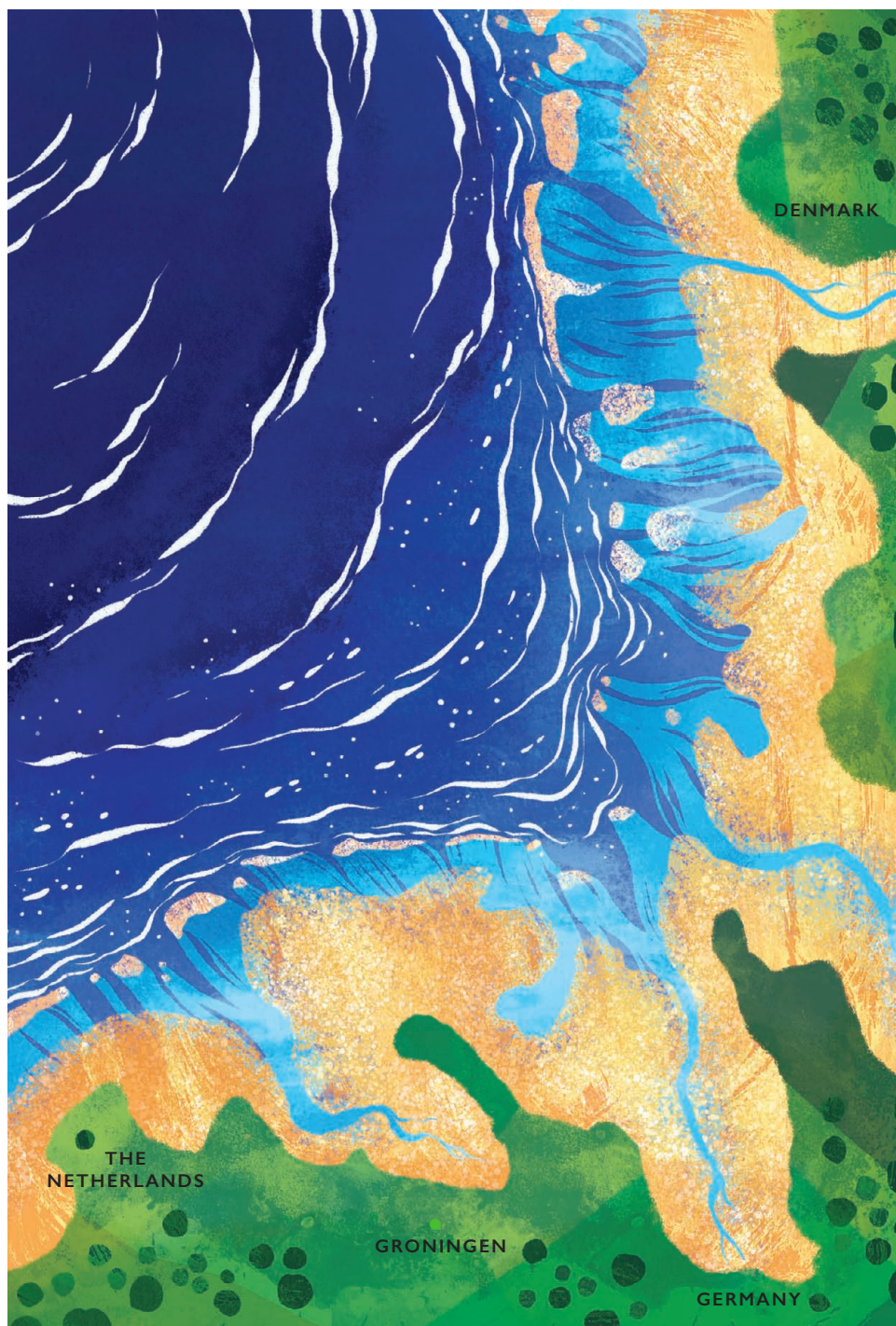


low-lying Netherlands is famed. These early pioneers took sod from the marsh to construct terps, raised mounds that provided a modicum of safety from storms and floods. Later, they surrounded these mounds with dykes, for greater protection; later still, they expanded their scale, creating terp villages, even terp cities. It's still possible to see these 'Dutch mountains' dimpling the mind-bending flatness, some topped with churches and connected by ancient sea walls that now make excellent walking and cycling trails.

Greater knowledge and invention continued to help tame elements of this landscape. Dykes, locks, polders and pumping stations made it a far less fragile place to live. But the sea itself remains largely undisturbed, its spirit undimmed, which is why its biodiversity is so rich. Even if it's not always obvious to the naked eye.

The Wadden Sea's salt marshes alone contain around 2,300 species of flora and fauna, with 2,700-odd more in the marine and brackish zones. This includes microscopic algae and forests of seaweeds that provide vital sustenance for myriad mud worms, molluscs, crustaceans and fish, which in turn feed porpoises and seals. Then there are the birds, in their winged multitudes: up to 12 million use the area each year, some resident, some passing through, all attracted by the abundance of food, the lack of predators and the low levels of human interference. There are dunlin tip-toeing through the shallows, barking barnacle geese, peregrine falcons startling the oystercatchers into high-pitched frenzies. More than 25 per cent of Europe's Eurasian spoonbills, sandwich terns and avocets breed here. In late summer, shelducks come to moult. Spring and autumn see stop-offs by migratory birds heading along the East Atlantic Flyway, between the Arctic and Africa. In winter, mammoth murmurations of starlings turn the sky black with their twisting, aurora-like avian acrobatics.

Perhaps the best way to experience the Wadden Sea is to smell its briny-briskness in your nostrils and feel its ooze between your toes. *Wadlopen* (mud walking) is the practice of hiking across the seabed at low tide, splashing, squelching and waist-deep wading to get from the mainland to an outlying isle. Note, though, that a guide is essential. The Wadden Sea is too temperamental, too tricky, too wild to be navigated alone.



Where? Aeolian Islands, Italy

What? Volatile sea volcano in a state of awesome agitation

STROMBOLI

FOR AS long as anyone can remember, this small, cone-shaped isle, rising from the cobalt-blue waves, has been in a bad mood – some 2,000 years or more of angry outbursts. Locals call it simply Iddu (Him).

For the island is both comrade and deity, and acts like a teenage boy: erratic, irascible, self-willed. He grumbles and rumbles, frequently spits fire and hurls rocks, venting his inner rage. But he's also a lovable rogue, a *bel giovanotto* with a flair for the dramatic, a streak of the wild ...

Iddu – better known to most as Stromboli – is one of the UNESCO-listed Isole Eolie (Aeolian Islands), an archipelago of seven peaks scattered off the north coast of Sicily. Greek settlers named the group of islands after Aeolus, the divine keeper of the winds, who is said to have locked storms safely away within his palace here. It's certainly long been a tempestuous part of the globe. It's where the African and European tectonic plates clash, the former constantly shifting towards and under the latter, producing magma that moves up to the earth's surface and forms volcanoes – in this case, the Aeolian Arc.

All seven of the islands show various signs of their volcanic origins. The beaches are curves of black sand, the coastlines are gnarled and craggy, the soil dark and rich, giving rise to an abundance of flowers, vegetables and wine. They are also dotted with more obvious evidence: sulphur-yellow fumaroles, thermal pools, warm mud baths, hot-to-touch craters and ducts spewing pungent steam.

However, only two of the islands are still active: Stromboli and Vulcano. The latter, the southernmost isle, is said to be the forge of



Vulcan, Roman god of fire and metalworking. But since its last major eruption in 1888–90, it has remained largely quiet, its emissions mostly limited to rotten-egg-stinking gas.

Stromboli is another matter. Known as the 'Lighthouse of the Mediterranean', it is one of the world's most active volcanoes, bubbling along in a permanent state of eruption. Typically, every 20 or 30 minutes, this 926m-high (3,035ft) stratovolcano lets off small, brief explosions of dust, steam, incandescent cinders and glowing lava from vents inside its summit crater that shoot tens of hundreds of metres up into the air. So textbook is its behaviour that the phrase 'Strombolian eruptions' has become the official term for such volcanic activity: that is, relatively mild discharges, with an explosivity index of only one to three (the scale goes up to eight, eight being 'mega-colossal'). Occasionally, though, Iddu becomes more violent. In the past century there have been a handful of outbursts and outpourings powerful enough to cause damage and endanger lives. There were two explosive events in 2019: during the first, a hiker was killed by flying debris; the second saw ash billowing more than a mile into the sky and lava spewing down Stromboli's sides into the sea.

Remarkably, given its hyper-activity, the island has been inhabited for millennia; currently there are around 500 residents. Iddu isn't the easiest landlord but he does provide fertile soil for farming and, more lately, a draw for tourists and their dollars. Many curious travellers sail over from Naples, Sicily and the other Aeolian isles to take a boat around to the Sciara del Fuoco, the black laval scar on Stromboli's northern flank, to watch the explosions from sea level, or – when conditions and pyrotechnics permit – to trek up to the crater itself to experience the action up close.

It's a tough three-or-so-hour hike to reach the top, which must be done in the company of a guide. Trips tend to leave in the cooling late afternoon, so that the summit is gained in time to watch the sun sink into the sparkling waves or, even better, after dark, to see the full effects of Stromboli's red-hot fury play out against the black night sky.



Where? Castile and León, Spain

What? Striking after-effects of humankind plundering nature

LAS MÉDULAS

THE LAND here looks more Martian than Iberian; not quite of the earth. And in a way it isn't – the scarred slopes, hoodoos, scraped gullies and oddly angled shards of blood-orange clay are entirely unnatural. A mountain-scape messed about with. The slowly unfolding processes of geology superseded by the meddling of man. And why? For gold. A patch of ground turned inside out by avarice, ravaged and raw but wildly dramatic in its devastation . . .

The UNESCO-listed Cultural Landscape of Las Médulas is rich and strange. It lies in tucked-away El Bierzo, in the northwest corner of Castile and León, an area of lowlands drained by the Sil River, hemmed in by mountains, long cut off from neighbouring regions. People have lived here since the late Paleolithic period and, from the 3rd century BC, Hispano-Celtic Asturs settled on the fertile higher ground, building well-defended hill forts and extracting precious metals from the waterways – eons of geological reworking led to an abundance of gold in the rocks hereabouts.

But it was the arrival of the Romans that truly transformed the area's look and fortunes. Following the triumph of Emperor Augustus during the Astur–Cantabrian Wars (29–19 BC), El Bierzo – then known as Bergidum – became absorbed into the Roman Empire and, before long, home to its biggest mining centre: a huge open-cast mine reaching 3km (1.85 miles) in breadth and plunging more than 100m (328ft) deep.

It was the manner of the Roman's engineering system that had such a profound effect – environmental exploitation on an unprecedented scale in the ancient world. They called it *ruina*





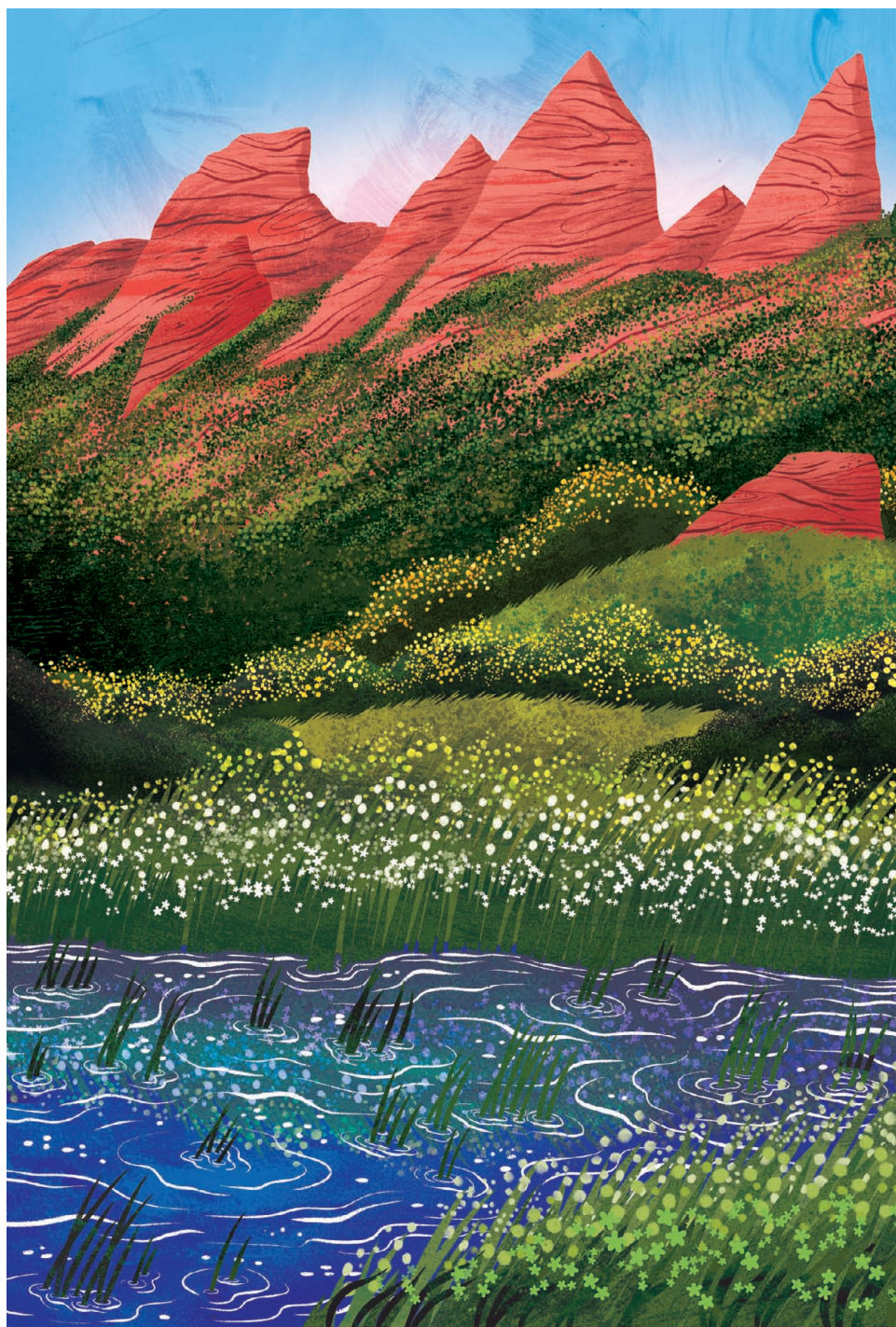


montium (the wrecking of the mountains), and utilised the laws of hydraulics, as well as tens of thousands of workers and slaves, to prise out vast quantities of gold. Rain and snow melt were collected in large reservoirs, built high up, while galleries with blocked ends were burrowed into the rock. The two were connected via a network of canals and, when the sluice gates were opened, huge amounts of water gushed down from the reservoirs into the tunnels, acting like liquid dynamite: the rock exploded, the gold was flushed out, the landscape was altered forever.

Whole hillsides were bored out and blown up; fatal landslides were common. In this fashion, the Romans extracted an estimated 1.6 million kilos (3.5 million pounds) of raw gold ore over the course of 250 years. Contemporary author Pliny the Elder is thought to have observed the workings at Las Médulas first hand, noting that, 'What happens is far beyond the work of giants . . . The cracks made in the entrails of the stone are so dangerous that it would be easier to find purpurine or pearls at the bottom of the sea than make scars in the rock. How dangerous we have made the earth!'

The changes wrought on Las Médulas extended far beyond the mine itself, creating an entirely new environment. The waste materials thrown out by the excavations formed enormous plains of discarded tailings; soil and sludge accumulated, blocking valleys and leading to the creation of lakes at Somido and Carucedo – today, these are thriving protected wetlands, where an array of birds and plants have moved in. Later, the tracks of the canals were adopted as communication links and drovers' roads, for moving messages and livestock across the region. Also, the crops introduced by the Romans – most notably grape vines and chestnut trees – still flourish, cloaking the countryside.

The best place to get a sense of Las Médulas' scale and scope is Orellán. The Romans established a metalworking village here in the 1st century AD, where residents cast iron tools; from the Mirador de Orellán there are views over the ocean of brutalised ochre outcrops, jutting up amid the woodland. Nearby, a path leads inside the ancient workings – with a hard hat, you can stoop into the dark tunnels, getting intimate with the mine's eroded innards, with its dark and destructive past.



Where? Portugal

What? Prehistoric art meets
a reviving riverine
wilderness

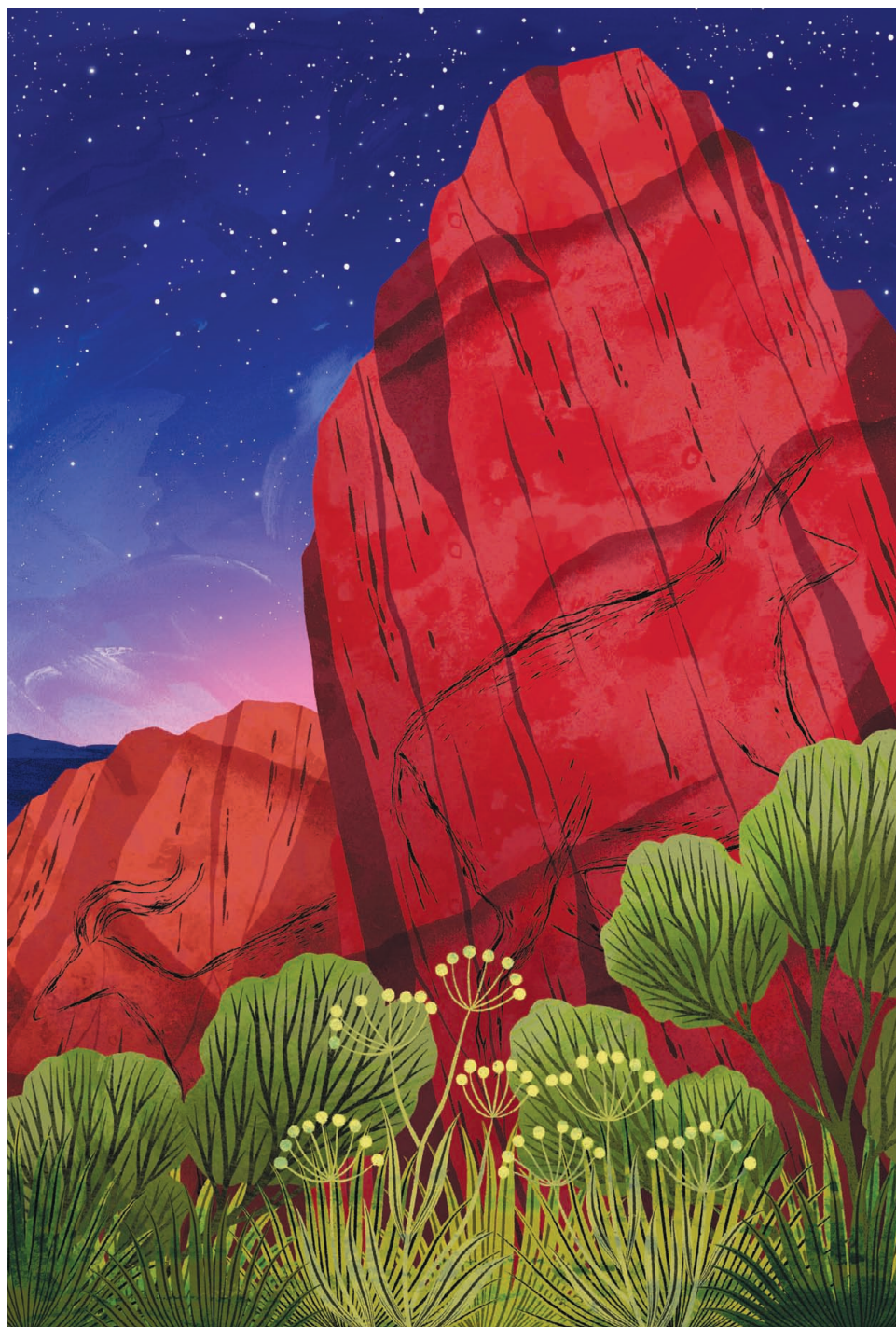
CÔA VALLEY

HUMANS AND animals have been rubbing along together in this river valley for tens of thousands of years. We know this because it tells us so. It's a relationship recorded directly on the rock. The schist

slabs here serve as an outdoor gallery and archaeological account, bearing the creations of generations; there is a menagerie etched into this hardest of canvases using tools of quartz and flint. Early artists drew what they knew: deer, goats, ibex, aurochs (huge cattle-like creatures, long since extinct). They drew them in herds and alone, sitting and standing, as abstract outlines and as detailed studies, flecked with individual hairs. It is a logbook of the lifestyle of early man, who found shelter and sustenance in abundance along this riverbank. As the centuries passed, the balance of man and beast shifted; the land was part-tamed. But as the region's fortunes flux once more, its future looks set to be re-wild ...

The River Côa slices through the hills of western Iberia much as it has done since the last Ice Age, its watercourse virtually unchanged. It rises in the Serra da Malcata mountains, a natural reserve of Pyrenean, holm and cork oak forests, hazelnut and strawberry trees, rare birds and mammals, notably the Iberian lynx.

From here the Côa runs north, largely via typical Portuguese *montado*, swathes of tree-dotted savannah created by centuries of livestock grazing; this is where cattle roam, olives and almonds are grown, pigs snuffle for acorns, mushrooms are foraged, game is hunted and cork bark is stripped from the trees. But the Côa also cuts through inaccessible areas of rocky heath, steep valleysides and precipitous gorges where nature is left largely to do its own thing.







Finally, near the old whitewashed town of Vila Nova de Foz Côa, a hop-skip from the Spanish border, the Côa pours into the mighty Douro River, which continues westward, via vineyard-striped banks, to reach Porto and the Atlantic Ocean.

This whole area has been occupied since Paleolithic times – the oldest engravings found in the Côa Valley so far are around 25,000 years old, while the most recent were added in the 20th century. It's an epoch-spanning palimpsest, with drawings of Ice Age-era mammals accompanied and overlaid with bridled horses, battle scenes, swords and shields, Roman motifs, Christian crosses, even a steam engine crossing a bridge, dated 1944. Curiously, these depictions are not hidden away in caves, as much ancient art is, but rather carved on the outer sides of the rocks, an open-air museum. Indeed, local farmers and shepherds have always known about this doodle treasure trove. But it was only officially 'rediscovered' in the 1990s, when work began on a large, controversial dam near the Côa's mouth. The dam project was halted and the ancient art – encompassing more than 80 sites and around 1,200 outcrops bearing up to 12,000 engravings – protected within the Foz Côa Archaeological Park and World Heritage listed by UNESCO.

Now that this ancient human heritage has been safeguarded, it is the turn of the surrounding environment to be looked after. While the river itself might be unchanged in its trajectory, its culture has swerved. Since the Middle Ages, large-scale cattle-grazing has tramped down both the physical landscape and the rich biodiversity of the region; overhunting has led to wild species being pushed to the brink; natural food chains have been disrupted. But, by the late 20th century, with more people leaving this rural area to earn an easier livelihood elsewhere, the land has been abandoned, human interference has reduced and the doors have opened for the Côa to be reclaimed by nature.

Now, the Greater Côa Valley is part of the Endangered Landscapes Programme, which seeks to create a better future for this important wildlife region, and to gradually ease the *montado* into a wilder version of itself. By protecting core areas of biodiversity – such as the Faia Brava Reserve – and linking these hotspots with well-managed landscapes, grazed by small herds of semi-wild Garrano horses and Maronesa cows, it's hoped a great, green corridor will be created, to which key species can return and move freely within. These species include everything from griffon and

Egyptian vultures, endangered black storks and Bonelli's eagles to wild boar, roe deer and Iberian wolf. And it's happened. Apex predators like the wolf are returning, black vultures are breeding and even the rare Iberian lynx is starting to reappear.

As has always been the case in this valley, none of this is possible without human interaction and engagement. Key to success here is minimising conflict between shepherds trying to earn a living and the reintroduction of predators only too happy to seize an easy meal.

Also vital is bringing outsiders in to appreciate this long-overlooked wilderness – and the Côa Valley Grand Route does just that. This hiking, horse-riding and mountain-biking trail covers around 200km (124 miles), running from the river's headwaters to its mouth, crossing the remote, rugged hills of the Malcata and Faia Brava Reserves, getting to the heart of the region. It encourages travellers to scan the skies for the burgeoning birdlife, follow the tracks of the mammals making a return, but also appreciate the area's cultural riches: the medieval towns, the venerable vineyards and, of course, the rock engravings that tell the long human–animal history of this land.

Where? Namibia

What? Savage shore of shifting sands, shipwrecks and whale bones

SKELETON COAST

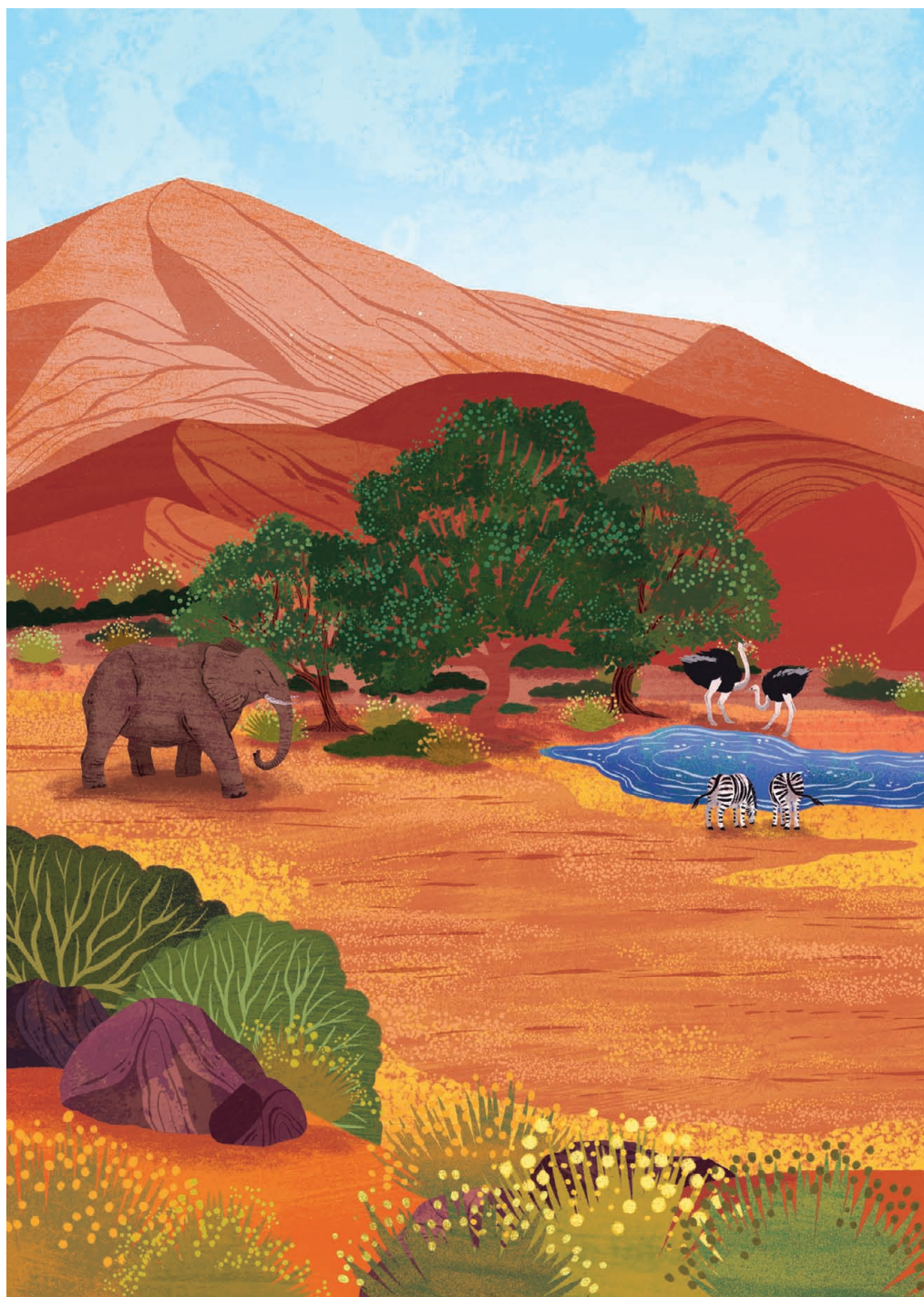
THE SKELETON Coast is not subtle in its warnings. The name alone should be enough, while the surfeit of wrecked ships, rent and rusting in the sand, reinforces the point: humans, venture here at your peril.

Hundreds of vessels have met their ends along this long, lonely, treacherous strand, where the ancient Namib Desert meets the cold Atlantic. Pity the poor crews who, over the centuries, became lost in the sea fogs, who were tossed hither and thither by the currents and the wind, and who perished in these wild waves. Or worse, maybe: those who somehow scrambled ashore, momentarily elated to have been spared, only to find themselves marooned on an unimaginably inhospitable coast, devoid of hope of salvation, likely wishing they'd gone down with their ships . . .

Namibia is one of the world's least populated countries – on average, around three people per square kilometre. And the Skeleton Coast National Park, in Namibia's far northwest, is one of the very emptiest areas of this already-empty land. Virtually no one lives along this savage shore, which stretches for 500km (310 miles) between the Ugab River and the Angolan border. That's because it's not well designed for living. Portuguese mariners, who started sailing past in the 15th century, christened it *As Areias do Inferno* (the Sands of Hell); even the San, the indigenous hunter-gatherers who know a thing or two about wilderness survival, called it 'the Land God Made in Anger'.

Fresh water is the chief concern. There isn't much. Rivers are rare and ephemeral, often running dry or choked with sand, leaving only a few vital pools. It seldom rains, even in the 'wet' season.







Rotting shipwrecks, weathered driftwood and desiccated animal bones lie on the hot-baked gravel and otherwise deserted beaches. Behind, dunes soar to the heights of skyscrapers. Behind those, the rippling sands and wilderness continue, and vegetation is scant. In most areas the sea mists that so thwart passing sailors are the only source of moisture at all.

And yet, there is an abundance of life here. The seas, of course, are teeming. In the crashing spume are Benguela dolphins, Cape fur seals, killer whales and humpbacks, and numerous species of shark. But the land, too, is surprisingly diverse. While there are few trees, there's a rainbow of lichen, succulents that look like living stones and odd *Welwitschia mirabilis*, a scrappy-looking plant that can live to be over 1,000 years old. Birds abound – over 200 species, from blushing flamingoes to endemic Damara terns, which nest down on the gravel plains. There are striking Namaqua chameleon and web-footed geckoes that dash across the dunes. Desert-adapted elephants – smaller than their more common African brethren – might be seen wandering along the strand line; they frequent the riverbeds, digging out waterholes that other animals might then use: giraffe, oryx and zebra, spotted hyena, solitary jackal, black rhino. Even desert-adapted lions might be seen.

Human presence is at a minimum, though the semi-nomadic Himba people have long found a way to eke out an existence in the hinterland. They rear goats and cattle, and cake themselves in ochre mud to protect against the scorching sun; their metal and leather ankle cuffs are decorative but also guard against snakes.

Visiting is not straightforward. The Skeleton Coast's southern fringe is accessible to day visitors as long as they have a permit and a 4WD vehicle. A road out of the old Germanic town of Swakopmund heads up towards the gate, via pungent Cape Cross – home to 100,000 Cape fur seals and a lonely pillar marking where Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão landed in 1486, the first European known to step onto Namibian soil.

Venturing beyond the Hoanib River, into the park's roadless, remarkable far north, is forbidden unless you fly into one of a handful of camps that has special permission to operate here. Few make the journey, but those who do spend the night out here, in the seeming emptiness, get to witness life on the very edge.



Where? Zagora, Morocco

What? A small, spectacular ripple in the world's greatest desert

ERG CHIGAGA

LESS A wilderness than a mirage, the Sahara stretches far beyond its mere physical boundaries. This vast desert's sands slip from northern Africa straight into the human imagination. Its very existence shimmers like a heat haze. A land loosened at the seams; not as it seems. Geography blurred by literature and legend. Because the Sahara is simply too huge to fully comprehend; a place of extremes, from stupefying heat and unslakable thirst, to ageless silence and near-infinite desolation. Harsh without compromise, wild beyond compare ...

The Sahara is the largest hot desert in the world – only the icy-cold wastes of the Arctic and Antarctica are bigger. In all, it smothers 9.4 million square kilometres (3.6 million square miles) across 11 countries, stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Red Sea, up to the Mediterranean and down to the semi-arid plains of the Sahel. Its name is straightforward, deriving from the Arabic word *ṣaḥra*, which simply means 'desert'.

For most, this word conjures sand. Vast sweeps of it, flowing like an apricot ocean, with sinuous, sculpted waves crashing off into an immense blue horizon. In truth, most of the Sahara – more than 80 per cent – is not sand dunes at all. It is gravel fields and salt flats, mountains and depressions, *hammada* (rocky plateaux) and *wadis* (dry river valleys). It is a tough, barren, dangerous place, yes, but it is not all the same. It changes with the wind and with the millennia: it's reckoned that roughly every 20,000 years, the Sahara fluctuates between being arid and inhospitable and being ripe and lush, capable of supporting a full menagerie of life. Fossils and rock art







discovered in the region reveal that species such as giraffe, elephant, rhinoceros and hippopotamus once roamed here.

Though conditions are currently severe, life does continue. Wherever water manages to emerge and vegetation push through, the hardiest souls will gather. Centuries ago, huge camel caravans made slow, gruelling journeys across the Sahara, braving fiery temperatures, suffocating sandstorms, ambush and starvation to transport precious goods such as salt and gold. There's no need for these thousands-strong herds any more, but a few nomadic groups continue their traditional free-ranging ways; they still call this desert home.

Given the vastness, parchedness and environmental hostility of the Sahara, as well as a few fractious borders, visiting isn't straightforward. The Berber, or Amazigh (free men), who know the desert better than anyone, navigate by passed-down stories and the stars. Those without such intimate knowledge would be ill-advised to roam here alone. Getting lost is easier than not.

Morocco's Erg Chigaga provides a glorious gateway for the Sahara novice. An 'erg' is a dune, but this distant wilderness – a 10-hour drive from the bustling souks of Marrakech, via lush oases and crumbling kasbahs – is more than that. The most extensive sand sea in the country, it's like a page from the *Arabian Nights*; a full magic carpet of dunes. A Hollywood-worthy rise and ripple of burnt-orange crescents.

The final leg of the journey to Erg Chigaga, from the oasis town of M'Hamid El Ghizlane, is a gradual sink into the fairytale Sahara. With every mile, the undulations increase, the sand becomes more widespread, the sense of remoteness more complete. At Erg Chigaga, there are Bedouin tents offering desert hospitality and camels tethered, for deeper exploration into the dunes. The simplest pleasure, though, is to climb the towering sand hills – one step forward, two steps back – to watch as the setting sun turns the world gold, pink, purple, the darkness falls, and the galaxies emerge.

The French writer and pilot Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once crash-landed in the Sahara, and summed up its contradictions; the fact that it can be both emptiness and everything-ness at the same time. 'One sits down on a desert sand dune, sees nothing, hears nothing,' he wrote. 'Yet through the silence something throbs, and gleams ...'



Where? Borneo, Malaysia

What? Precious stronghold
of biodiversity on a
wild eastern isle

KINABATANGAN

LATE AFTERNOON on the languid river; the water is calm, air thick, jungle alive. The heat is heavy but, everywhere, something seems to swagger, skulk or stir. Fat snakes and bright bromeliads dangle

from the trunks and branches. Kingfishers perch hopefully on overhanging stems while sea eagles survey imperiously from on high. Proboscis monkeys – big bellied, bigger nosed – jump from bank to bank, making an almighty din. And, poking above the latte-brown surface, are a crocodile's eyes and nostrils, small specks belying the size of the prehistoric body below. Borneo, the world's third-largest island, has some serious issues, its environments under threat. But along this river, nature endures and thrives . . .

Straddling the equator and divided between three nations, the island seethes with biodiversity: its peat swamps, mangroves and ancient rainforests – estimated to be 140 million years old – are home to around 15,000 different types of flowering plants, 3,000 types of trees, 221 terrestrial mammals, 420 birds. And this is growing all the time: on average, three new species are discovered every month in the mountainous centre alone.

Rampant deforestation, for timber and oil palm plantations, is devastating parts of the island. But significant swathes of rainforest remain, some of it now protected within designated conservation areas. One such area is the Sungai Kinabatangan.

The long, meandering Kinabatangan River rises in the Crocker Range in Malaysian Borneo's Sabah state and flows eastwards for 560km (nearly 350 miles) before disgorging into the Sulu Sea. En route it winds through dense stands of dipterocarp trees and







seasonally flooded forests to oxbow lakes, swamps and coastal mangroves. It is an aquatic avenue, pushing through the impenetrable foliage, and nurturing some of the highest wildlife concentrations in all of Borneo. In 2005, with logging and development nearing its edges, the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary was created, a narrow refuge that safeguards this rarest and richest of riverbanks. The state government declared the move as Sabah's 'gift to the earth'.

The Kinabatangan floodplain has long been of human interest. Locals here became known as the Orang Sungai (the river people); living in scattered settlements of stilted houses along the Kinabatangan, they depended on this riparian ecosystem for freshwater fish and prawns, and items such as beeswax, rattan and ivory, which were exported all the way to China. Kampung Bilit, one of the river's oldest settlements, was once a key port for the trade in edible birds' nests (made by swiftlets from their own saliva); these were collected from the nearby Gomantong Caves and prized by the Chinese for their allegedly medicinal properties.

The Orang Sungai remain deeply connected to the river; they hold a profound respect for this unique habitat and will even give thanks to the animals for the privilege of viewing them. Indeed, these days Bilit, as well as the larger hubs of Abai, nearer the river's mouth, and Suku are more likely to trade in ecotourism. From lodges in these backwater villages it's possible to board small boats and explore the river and its secretive tributaries; to drift off in a hammock to the sounds of hooting owls or whooping gibbons.

The local cast list is immense. There are flying geckoes and monitor lizards, freshwater sharks and Irrawaddy dolphins, tiny mouse-deer and bearded pigs, moon rats and hairy-nosed otters, Bornean pygmy elephants and Malay sun bears. There's also a beautiful bevy of birds – from scarlet-rumped trogon and hooded pitta to eight handsome types of hornbill. Also, ten primate species swing amid these trees, not least the endangered orang utan – the 'old man of the forest'. They build nests high in the treetops, making a new one each night to avoid predators, so aren't easy to track down. But puttering along the Kinabatangan at dawn, with a good guide and a keen eye, is your greatest chance of spotting one in the wild. The best gift Borneo can bestow.



Where? Sichuan, China

What? Rare wild sanctuary for one of the world's most vulnerable species

MOUNT SIGUNIANG

THE DENSE bamboo is disorientating. Battalions of green stalks streaking the hillsides, distorting everything; concealing much, revealing little, playing tricks with every shape and shadow. The mist doesn't

help, swirling like smoke around the maples and firs, between the rock pillars and the sheer-drop valleys, further obscuring the view. Something crunches in this steep, confusing forest – but is it beast or breeze? This is not an easy place to find one of the world's rarest, most endearing, most symbolic creatures ...

The giant panda is more than a bear. It's an icon. Of a country, and a whole conservation movement, since the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) adopted the animal as its logo in 1961. For the Chinese, the panda is an emblem of peace and friendship, of strength and bravery, able to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck.

These animals once lumbered right across China, even into neighbouring Myanmar and Vietnam; ancestors of the *xionghmao* – giant cat bear – have been chewing bamboo hereabouts for at least two million years. But more recent centuries of deforestation have devastated their range. There are now thought to be only around 1,800 giant pandas in the wild, restricted to a few mountainous patches of western China's Sichuan, Gansu and Shaanxi Provinces.

In 2006, a chunk of this vanishing territory was designated the Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries World Heritage site by UNESCO. Encompassing seven nature reserves and nine scenic parks stretched across the Qionglai and Jiayin Mountains, this is the largest remaining contiguous panda habitat, and is believed to be home to



30 per cent of the remaining panda population. Though, in this type of terrain, no one can be quite sure.

These are high, wild mountains, cloaked in humid, temperate forests. Torrential rains, soupy mists, a near year-round mantle of heavy cloud and a thick understorey of bamboo add to their mystery and impenetrability. But nature thrives, in diversity if not in numbers: as well as giant panda, the sanctuaries are home to rare snow leopards and clouded leopards, white-lipped deer and golden snubnosed monkeys, the endangered red panda (which, despite its name, is not a close relation of the giant variety) and the shaggy takin, a strange-looking goat-antelope hybrid. Birds abound, from pheasants and eagles to black-necked cranes. The forests are flush with ancient dove trees and Chinese money maples, with magnolias, rhododendrons and orchids.

The dominant feature in the World Heritage site is 6,250m (20,505ft) Mount Siguniang, the region's highest peak. Snow-topped and legend-laced, some entwine Siguniang with the panda's own origin story. One version tells of a kind shepherdess who would take her sheep into the hills, and who was always joined by a panda – animals that, at the time, were all white. One day a leopard attacked the panda. The shepherdess tried to fend it off but was killed. When the other pandas heard, they were distraught. They attended her funeral, respectfully covering their arms in ashes as was the custom, and sobbed loudly. They wiped their eyes, hugged their bodies and tried to cover their ears to block out their own wailing. Wherever they touched their fur, the ashes stained it black; the marks never came off. The shepherdess's three sisters were also overcome with grief, and threw themselves into her grave. The earth trembled and a huge mountain emerged: Mount Siguniang, Four Sisters Mountain. Each sister was transformed into a separate peak, which continue to watch over pandas to this day.

Truth is, sighting a bear beneath Mount Siguniang is unlikely – though piles of their bright-green droppings may be found (they produce 10kg/22lb a day). Bear encounters are more likely at Wolong, where it's possible to get up close to the animals at the breeding and research centre. But hiking in the wilderness around the peak, amid fungi as big as bicycle helmets, moss-clad boulders, cascading streams, forests of birch and larch, alpine lakes and – of course – stand upon stand of bamboo, is to enter the pandas' spiritual home.



Where? West Papua, Indonesia

What? Brilliantly biodiverse marine habitat, entwined with evolutionary theories

RAJA AMPAT

THIS IS the middle of nowhere. Yet the centre of the underwater world. A scatter of jungle-wigged rocks, little more than puffs of green mushrooming from blinding turquoise-azure-sapphire seas, extreme in their isolation. Even now, they're not easy to reach – some of these islands remain days-long voyages from the nearest significant civilisation. These are still places of inaccessibility, removed from the modern age. Yet, while human life here is sparse and slow-paced, all around lies a marine Manhattan. An aquatic Big Apple: crowded, throbbing, vibrant, flashy. The most diverse. The most dazzling. Seas that never sleep . . .

Indonesia isn't short of islands – some 17,000 or so make up this continent-spanning, equator-straddling nation, the largest archipelagic country in the world. Raja Ampat, in Indonesia's far east, comprises around 600 of those islands (plus many more cays, shoals and sandbanks) – perhaps the most magnificent of the lot.

The human history of Raja Ampat is still being uncovered. It's thought that, when hominids first migrated from Africa some 65,000 years ago, they may have passed this way to reach what is now Australia – higher sea levels and land bridges facilitated eastward movement. Later, Neolithic peoples may have branched out from here to populate the far-flung outcrops of the Pacific. More recent records reveal that the islands were once a part of the kingdom of Tidore, one of the powerful spice sultanates of the Moluccas, before falling under Dutch rule.

The name Raja Ampat ('Four Kings' in Bahasa Indonesia) comes, they say, from the legend of a woman who once found six eggs –







belonging to a dragon or a mega bird – on the banks of the Waikeo River. Four of them hatched and brought forth boys, who grew up to become the kings of the archipelago's four main islands: Waigeo, Batanta, Salawati and Misool. One egg produced a woman, who was pregnant and cast off in a sea shell. The last egg would not hatch and turned to stone; it is still kept in a hut by the river on Waigeo, wrapped in a cloth and only removed once a year for a ceremonial washing.

While Raja Ampat may be named for its ancient rulers, these days it is known – if this remote archipelago is known at all – for its wilder inhabitants. It sits at the edge of the so-called Coral Triangle, an area of tropical waters that includes parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, the Solomon Islands and Timor-Leste. Here, deep currents funnel nutrients into the coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangrove marshes, and the meddling of man has been kept to a minimum. The result is a multifarious, undisturbed underwater landscape, chock-a-block with colour and life.

For a start, there are around 600 coral species – some 75 per cent of the corals found worldwide. This diverse reef network supports around 1,500 species of fishes; huge bumphead parrot fish, venomous but resplendent lionfish, enormous shoals of fusiliers and moorish idols, sweetlips and surgeon fish, barracudas and batfish. There are almost 700 species of molluscs (including 7 different types of giant clam) and 6 of the world's 7 types of sea turtles. There are dugongs and wobbegongs, pygmy seahorses and car-sized manta rays, spinner dolphins, hammerheads and walking sharks. This is less sea than soup, crystal clear but thick with creatures. Indeed, so abundant is the marine activity that experts have dubbed Raja Ampat a biodiversity hotspot, even a 'species factory'; its ecosystems are believed to help restock reefs right across the Indian Ocean and South Pacific.

It is also gorgeous – more pristine than even the sweetest dream of what a wild island paradise should be. This is a place where green forests segue into swathes of untrodden powder sand; of emerald-blue waters clear as glass, that offer world-beating diving and snorkelling; of bats and butterflies and resplendent birds-of-paradise capering in the clearings and the tree tops; of secret lagoons and hidden caves; of lakes pulsating with stingless jellyfish and after-dark waves glittering with bioluminescence. When pioneering British biologist Alfred Russel Wallace visited Raja Ampat

in the 19th century, he was amazed, writing in his book, *The Malay Archipelago*, that 'every islet was covered with strange-looking shrubs and trees, and was generally crowned by lofty and elegant palms, which also studded the ridges of the mountainous shores, forming one of the most singular and picturesque landscapes I have ever seen'.

It was Wallace's explorations in the Coral Triangle that helped him develop his own theory of evolution through natural selection (simultaneously to Charles Darwin, his more famous contemporary). While here he also identified the faunal divide through the Lombok Strait, subsequently named the 'Wallace Line': to the west of this, animals are largely of Asian origin; to the east – including Raja Ampat – they are more akin to those of Australasia. What Wallace saw among these remote specks in the ocean ultimately changed the thinking of the world.

Raja Ampat is still sharing its secrets. New species are discovered here all the time. It's been found that many coral species here may be more resistant to rising ocean temperatures, and could thus help replenish nearby reefs that have been damaged by coral-bleaching events. An unwaveringly wild place that might yet spread its wildness right across the seas.

Where? Bhutan

What? Highest unclimbed peak in the happiest wilderness

GANGKHAR PUENSUM

NO ONE has stood here. Except, maybe, the gods and the yetis. This soaring, snow-capped summit – up there with the highest in the world – is not open for exploration.

No earthly prints mark its flanks; no trails have been blazed to its icy peak. It is out of bounds; one of humankind's final frontiers. A symbol of humility; a reminder that not everything is within reach; a lesson in being at peace with what cannot be known. A wilderness that shall remain forever so ...

The Himalaya describe a mighty arc across India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal and China. The world's loftiest wild place, to be sure: most of the planet's highest mountains are here in this range, breath-stealing summits to which few outsiders ever venture – though that number is increasing at an alarming rate. In the past 20 years alone, the slopes of Mount Everest have seen a near-tenfold rise in footfall, as climbers scramble to conquer the planet's zenith.

Not so in Bhutan. This small, staunchly Buddhist Himalayan kingdom was long closed off to the outside world – it was not until the 1970s that the first foreign tourists were allowed in. It was around this time that then King Jigme Singye Wangchuck first spoke of gauging the country's success by its Gross National Happiness. He spoke of an enlightened society in which the spiritual health of the people and all sentient beings is more important than National Product. One key pillar of GNH is conservation and, as such, the Bhutanese constitution stipulates that no less than 60 per cent of its land should be forest-covered at all times – not only is this beneficial to nature, but, in Bhutan, trees are a symbol of longevity, beauty and compassion. In addition, more than half of the country



is protected, enabling endangered species such as Bengal tigers, snow leopards, elephants and black cranes to roam free. This protection extends to the country's tallest mountains, including Gangkhar Puensum.

Measuring 7,570m (24,836ft), Gangkhar Puensum – the White Peak of the Three Spiritual Brothers – is the highest mountain in Bhutan. It is also widely considered to be the world's highest unclimbed peak. Its elevation was first determined in the 1920s, though measurements and mapping were inconsistent and often inaccurate; some charts placed the peak in an entirely different location, making it hard to find, let alone ascend.

When Bhutan finally opened its doors to mountaineers in 1983, four expeditions attempted to scale Gangkhar Puensum over the subsequent decade or so. But each failed. The weather suddenly turned. Or unexpected obstacles blocked the way. The mountain, some said, simply did not wish to be climbed. Many local people believe their peaks to be the dwelling places of deities and spirits; to disturb these places, they say, is to incite the wrath of the gods. Some also believe that the *migoi* – the yeti – lives at these altitudes; any prints found in the snow here are attributed to these ape-like creatures.

Rating the spiritual beliefs of the populace above the desires of foreign adventurers, the Bhutanese government banned the climbing of peaks above 6,000m (19,685ft) in 1994 and, in 2003, mountaineering was banned altogether. Which leaves Gangkhar Puensum shrouded in mystery.

Trekking in the shadow of this enigmatic mountain is permitted, however. Permitted but tough. The valleys here, in the highlands of Laya and Lunana, are some of the remotest in the Himalaya, largely unexplored and dotted only with fluttering prayer flags, memorial stupas, the occasional monastery and hardy yak herders. The long, arduous Snowman Trek, which passes through these valleys, is known as one of the hardest hikes in the world, an adventure in a pristine amphitheatre of mountains, via the most isolated communities. But it is the only real chance of an encounter with Gangkhar Puensum, the mighty peak that remains forever untouched.



Where? Flinders Ranges, Australia

What? Incredible amphitheatre erupting from the ancient bush

WILPENA POUND

WHAT HAS happened, out here in the Outback? The way these old rocks rise – thrusting from the arid bushland like a colossal coliseum – seems improbable, theatrical, a stage set on an epic scale. Or

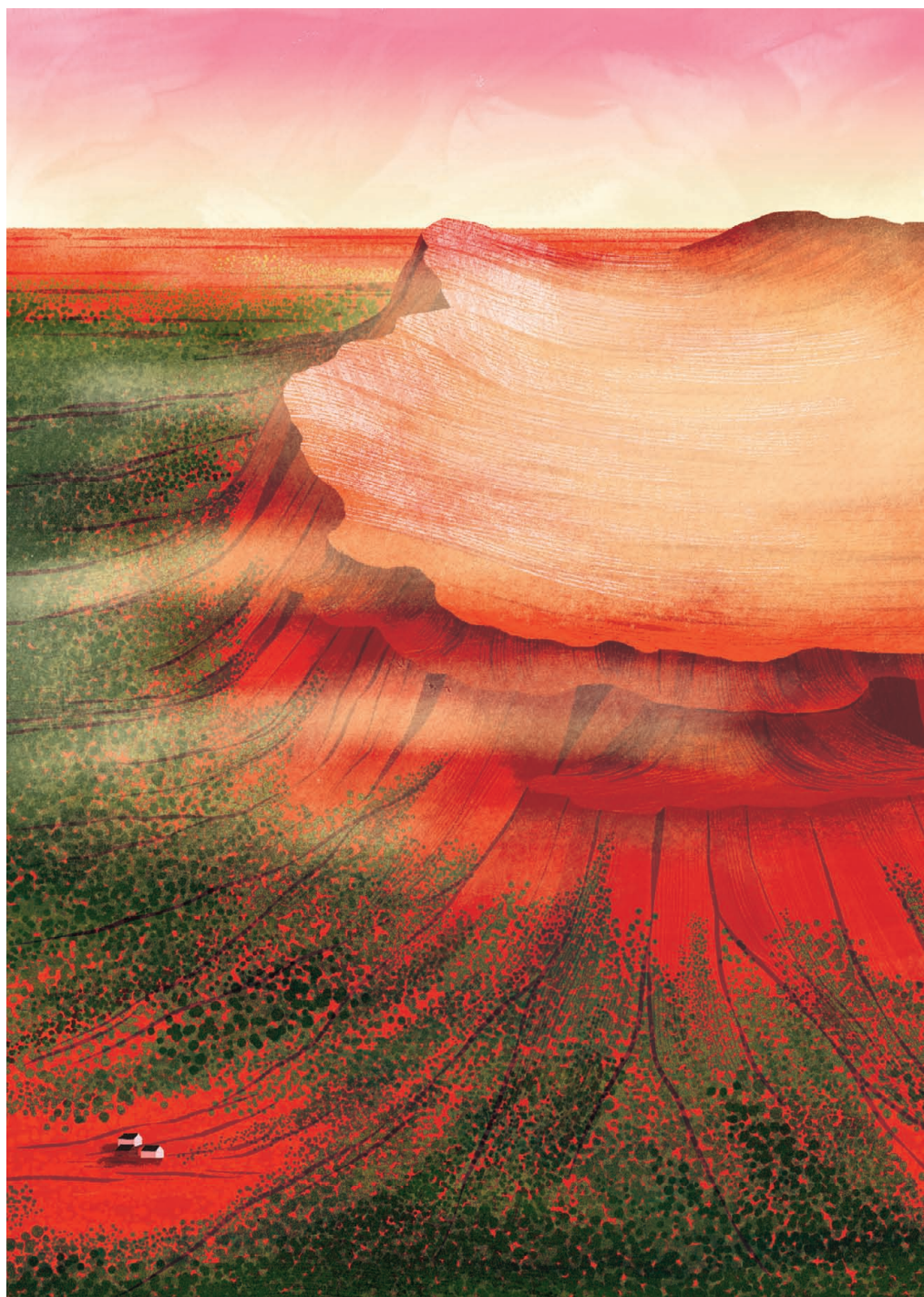
even, perhaps, the result of some extraterrestrial intervention. But no. Unlikely as it appears, this mighty kink of the mountains owes its astonishing arrangement to the long, slow, mundane grind of geology. Mother Nature's machinations over eons, creating a quartzite flourish in this most ancient of wild places . . .

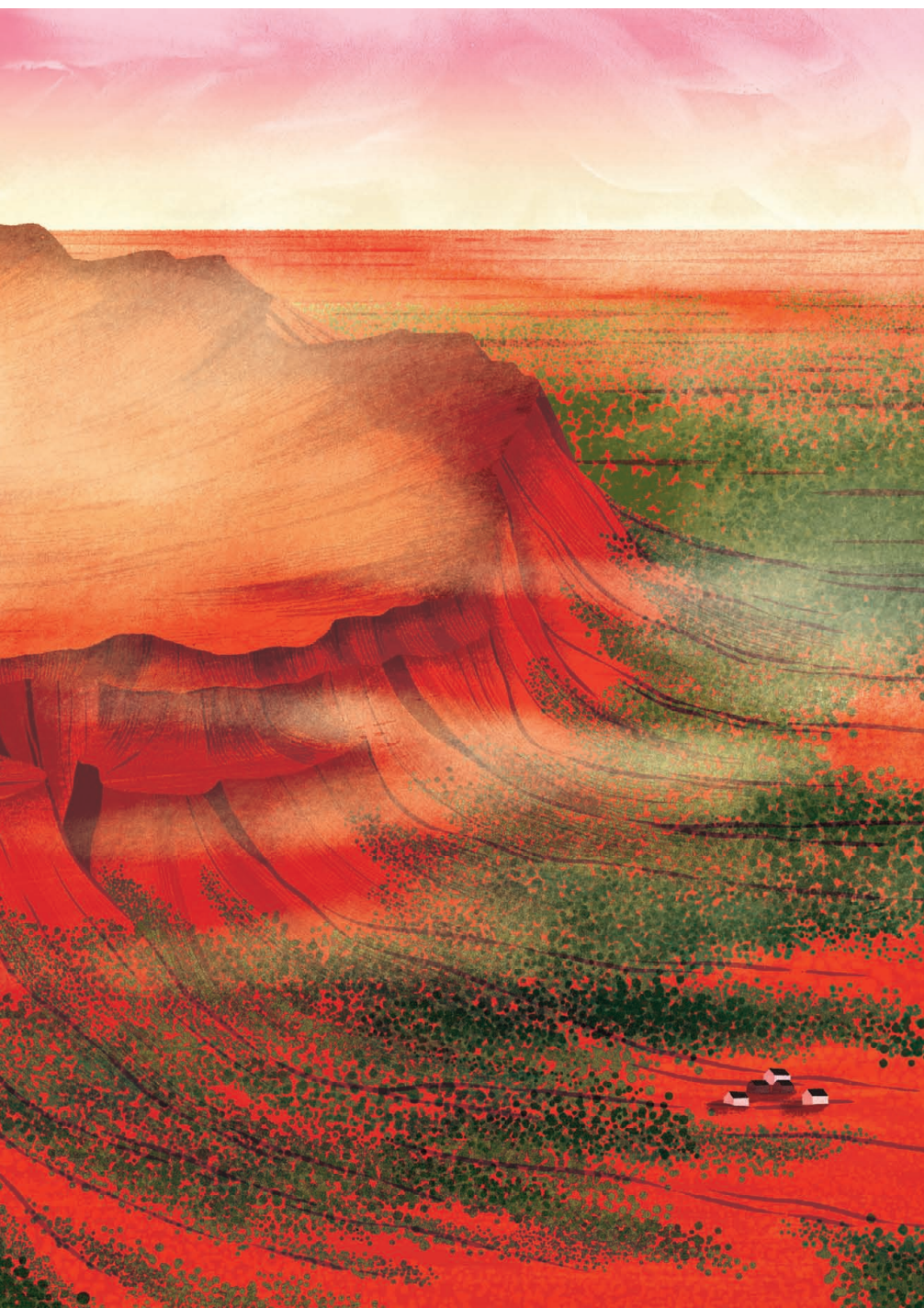
Australia is not short on wilderness. It's thought that more than 40 per cent of the country – an area about the size of India – remains barely touched by humankind. The indigenous people who have trodden here for around 50,000 years have done so oh-so lightly, living in harmony with the land, leaving scant trace.

Nowhere does this feel more apparent than away from Australia's edges, in its red-raw belly of burnt earth and spinifex grass, of beating sun and biting snakes, of wrinkled and wizened mountains that seem older than anything else on earth. Mountains like the Flinders Ranges.

This upland streak, which wends across South Australia between Port Augusta and Mount Hopeless, has been some 800 million years in the making. From its beginnings, on the eastern shore of the Gondwana mega-continent, when masses of sedimentary rocks were deposited by a long-gone sea, to the subsequent folding, faulting and layering that gradually, doggedly moulded mountains higher than the Himalaya. And then to the ensuing half-billion years of relentless weathering that's ground them back down to their







current form: a trail of jagged escarpments, sandstone bluffs and rolling hills, the highest of which – St Mary Peak – measures only 1,171m (3,842ft) above sea level. The rocks here may have been reduced in stature over the millennia, but they reveal Australia's very origins, its history laid bare in the exposed strata.

The most striking formation in the Flinders is Wilpena Pound, a hefty oval-shaped basin where the land looks like it has been fist-punched by the gods. Untrained eyes might theorise that it's the result of a massive meteor strike, or the remnants of a long-gone volcano. But no: it's the same geological slow-burn. Simply, the hard quartzites that cap these particular summits have better resisted the elements, leaving this dramatic basin to rise from the semi-desert.

The indigenous Adnyamathanha people have a different take. The first Australians of the Flinders Ranges, they have walked here for millennia. The oldest-known evidence – artefacts, pigments and bone excavated at Warraty Rock Shelter in the northern Flinders Ranges – dates back around 49,000 years. The Adnyamathanha know Wilpena Pound as Ikara, the meeting place. They tell of the Dreaming journey of Yurlu, the old kingfisher man, who travelled south to attend a *corroboree* (meeting) at Ikara. Passing through Brachina Gorge, Yurlu spied two Akurra (powerful serpents) heading the same way; they frightened him so he hid. The serpents continued, secretly entering Ikara under cover of darkness, via Vira Warldu (Edeowie Gap). The people already gathered there looked up and saw bright stars rising above them, which they took as a sign for the ceremony to begin. However, unbeknownst to them, they weren't looking at stars, but at the hungry eyes of the Akurra.

When Yurlu arrived, the ceremony was in full swing but the people still had no idea that the serpents were lying in wait. To try to warn them, Yurlu grabbed a fire stick from Walha, the wild turkey man, and tossed it high into the night sky, where it became the red star, Wildu (Mars). But this didn't scare the snakes. It only illuminated the horror to come. In a devilish whirlwind, the Akurra – one male, one female – encircled the people and ate them all up. Yurlu and Walha managed to escape. And the two Akurra, so full from their gruesome feast, coiled up together, forever intertwined, and died, their fat bodies forming the high, curved walls of Wilpena Pound. St Mary Peak, which the Adnyamathanha ask you don't climb, is the

head of the male Akurra; Beatrice Hill, the pound's second-highest point, is the head of the female.

Look in the right light, with the right eye, and this seems perfectly believable. Under the pale purple of dawn or the red-pink-gold of sunset, the cracks and fissures of the ancient rock seem to morph into reptilian scales. Despite attempts by the early European settlers, it is a landscape that will not be tamed. The remains of old cottages, even discarded farm equipment, unused for 100 years, can be seen, but now the pound – part of the Ikara-Flinders Ranges National Park – has been returned to nature.

Today, wildlife abounds. There are wedge-tailed eagles – Australia's largest bird of prey – soaring high above, scanning the ground for possible prey and emu families dashing amid the brush. There are spiny echidna curled up in the spinifex, besides red and grey kangaroos bounding around the waterholes. Reptiles love it here: the rocky crags and sandy tracks of Wilpena Pound suit bright-coloured tawny dragons – unfussy eaters, happy to snack on any sort of flowers or insects – as well as a cast of skinks, goannas and lizards that variously like to burrow into the soft earth and bask in the baking-hot sun.

There are also rare yellow-footed rock wallabies, known for their long, ring-patterned tails, bright-golden feet and rusty-grey coats, which render them virtually invisible among the rusty-grey rocks. Indeed, they're perfectly adapted to this hostile habitat, leaping across the cliffs and outcrops with supreme agility, hiding in high-up caves and surviving on bushes and trees, or nibbling the fresh grasses that flourish after precious rains. These animals were hunted to the brink of extinction but, thanks to conservation efforts, are now rebounding here – they especially love boulder-hopping in Brachina Gorge.

A road does cut through Wilpena Pound. But the best way to explore it is to walk – whether that's hiking along its sloping inner walls, amid its white cypress pines and huge river red gums or along its dry creek beds. Or perhaps head out to nearby Arkaroo Rock, where ancient Aboriginal art tells the story of Ikara's creation.

Where? South Island, New Zealand

What? Primeval, precious and pristine piece of the planet

TE WAHIPOUNAMU

IT'S THE land that time forgot. Where the swoop of the valleys, the cut of the fjords, the surge of the summits and the make-up of the forests hark back millions upon millions of years. To roam here is to travel

back to an era long before humankind meddled in nature; to see earth's steady evolution at the hands of creeping ice and shifting plates rather than deforestation, diggers or dynamite. A glimpse of what the planet once was, what it might have been . . .

Te Wahipounamu is not a wilderness, it's THE wilderness. Spreading 2.6 million hectares (6.4 million acres) across the southwest corner of South Island, where the Australian and Pacific continental plates touch, it covers 10 per cent of New Zealand. It also encompasses four national parks: glacier-streaked Westland Tai Poutini, the heady heights of Aoraki/Mount Cook, the remote uplands of Mount Aspiring and dramatic Fiordland, home to numerous namesake sea-flooded valleys, including Milford Sound. Across Te Wahipounamu, nature is unfettered. Tongues of ice creak and ooze, trees live for centuries, rare creatures flourish – from carnivorous land snails to the world's only alpine parrot – and fresh rivers gallivant through steep ravines, en route to the rugged coast.

Listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site – a rare designation for a wild landscape, which are more usually recognised as Natural Heritage sites – Te Wahipounamu is one of the best remaining examples of the ancient ecology of Gondwana, an echo of the super-continent that once incorporated present-day South America, Africa, Arabia, Madagascar, India, Australia and Antarctica. Gondwana began to break up around 180 million years ago; there



are rocks, landforms, flora and fauna in Te Wahipounamu that can be traced back over 80 million years, before New Zealand began to drift away. Because this landmass remained so long isolated after its separation (known human history dates back less than 1,000 years), it was fizzed and folded, gnawed and sculpted far from the rest of the world. As such, Te Wahipounamu remains largely unmodified and untouched.

There are alternative origin stories. To the Ngai Tahu – the main Maori *iwi* (tribe) of the South Island – Te Wahipounamu was created when the sons of Ranginui, the Sky Father, came down from the heavens and set out to circumnavigate Papatuanuku, Mother Earth. Their canoe hit a reef and an icy wind froze them into stone: their vessel became South Island; the biggest brother, Aoraki, became Mount Cook; the other brothers and the crew formed the Southern Alps. For the Ngai Tahu, these glacier-streaked mountains remain the places of the *atua* (gods). And the rivers that gush down from them carry highly prized pounamu, a tough, translucent jade rock that Maori carve into jewellery, weapons and tools. Thus Te Wahipounamu – the place of the greenstone.

Either way, nature is certainly in charge here. The region has only two major roads, and only scant traces of human interference, mainly at the edges. While hiking is a popular pastime, many parts of Te Wahipounamu don't even have trails. Head deep into the forests, amid the ancient beech and podocarp trees, and you're more likely to see rare creatures – such as flightless takahe and kiwi birds – than other people.

The easiest parts of Te Wahipounamu to access include some of the country's most awe-inspiring, and popular, sites. For instance, it's possible to walk up to – or crampon upon – the glittering tongues of Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers; to cruise or kayak on majestic Milford Sound, a dramatic waterfall-spattered fjord, home to dolphins, penguins and fur seals; to hike in the shadow of Aoraki/Mount Cook, New Zealand's highest peak. Perhaps best, though, is to fly over it all, to gain a big-picture perspective and to see how this sweep of native forest truly resembles the greenstone for which it's named.

However, the depths of Te Wahipounamu are hard to penetrate. Which, given it has been that way for millennia, seems as it should remain.



Where? North Carolina & Virginia,
USA

What? Fearsome mire that
became a human
sanctuary

GREAT DISMAL SWAMP

IT'S HARD to imagine a more unfriendly place. There's the sucky mud that oozes with omnipotence; the clawing thorns, trip-wire roots and impenetrable thickets.

There's the dread-dark water, haunted by will-o'-the-wisps, and the soup-like air: scalding, slick and thick with yellow flies and pugnacious mosquitos. This is a hot, green no-man's-land that seems more suited to bugs and snakes than people – but to which, regardless, man was drawn . . .

If ever a name could turn you away, this may be it. The Great Dismal Swamp seeps over 305 square kilometres (118 square miles) of marshy coastal plains in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, with Lake Drummond at its centre. It was once over ten times the size, before rapacious industrialists began to take an interest in the 18th century (though they weren't initially all that keen: the early surveyor William Byrd called it a 'vast body of dirt and nastiness').

These days, the remaining tract of swamp and forest is a National Wildlife Refuge, forming one of the most important wildlife habitats in the mid-Atlantic USA. It may be reduced but it is thriving, its forested wetlands of pine, poplar, cedar and maple-blackgum providing the perfect environment for numerous species. More than 200 types of bird have been recorded here, from wood ducks and warblers to barred owls. The bugs might be big and plentiful, but so are the butterflies. And while the panthers that once roamed hereabouts are long gone, still present are white-tailed deer, black bears and bobcats, snapping turtles, ground skinks







and bog lemmings. That unpromising name belies a colourful, creature-full wild place, not dismal at all.

Nor has it always been uninhabited. Groups of Native Americans are believed to have lived around the edges of the swamp from prehistoric times; they would venture into the mire when they needed to hunt or fish. Consequently, their legends lace the landscape – such as the story of the Firebird. This fearsome creature is said to have made its nest by causing a devastating wildfire, clearing the site that's now Lake Drummond. In revenge, a hunter murdered the Firebird's babies and used their feathers as a disguise to track it down; when the Firebird realised, it flew away, leaving the swamp in peace – although the blood of its chicks is still evident in the lake's reddish, tannin-rich waters.

Following the arrival of Europeans, however, indigenous people increasingly sought refuge deeper within Great Dismal. And they were not alone. From around the mid-17th century, escaped enslaved people – known as maroons – moved in, learning survival skills from those already there, founding settlements on the swamp's mesic islands, living in total isolation. For the maroons, the hardships presented by the swallowing mud and strangling humidity were preferable to a life in chains; indeed, they were the very factors that enabled them to live in freedom. The wilderness was their fortress – few lawmen dared chase them down here.

After the abolition of slavery, hiding was no longer required. Slowly, the swamp emptied of its stowaways, but was then decimated by industrial activity. Canals and ditches were cut, areas drained, millions of trees felled. By the time the remainder was protected in the 1970s, 90 per cent had been lost.

Today, a few trails and boardwalks provide access to this erstwhile inaccessible place. It's possible to walk alongside the Washington Ditch Trail, a channel dug by enslaved people for George Washington – before he was president he founded the Dismal Swamp Land Company to drain the area for logging and settlement. The trail leads deep into the forest to Lake Drummond, where bald cypress trees kneel in the water; bald eagles nest around the shore, and the skies ring with frog croaks and birdsong. Here, the swamp is at its most open and unintimidating. Yet it only takes a quick glance off the path, into the dense jumble of underbrush, bog and trees, to understand how easy it would be to get lost and stay that way forever.



Where? Utah, USA

What? Dramatic desert of
ravishingly diverse rock

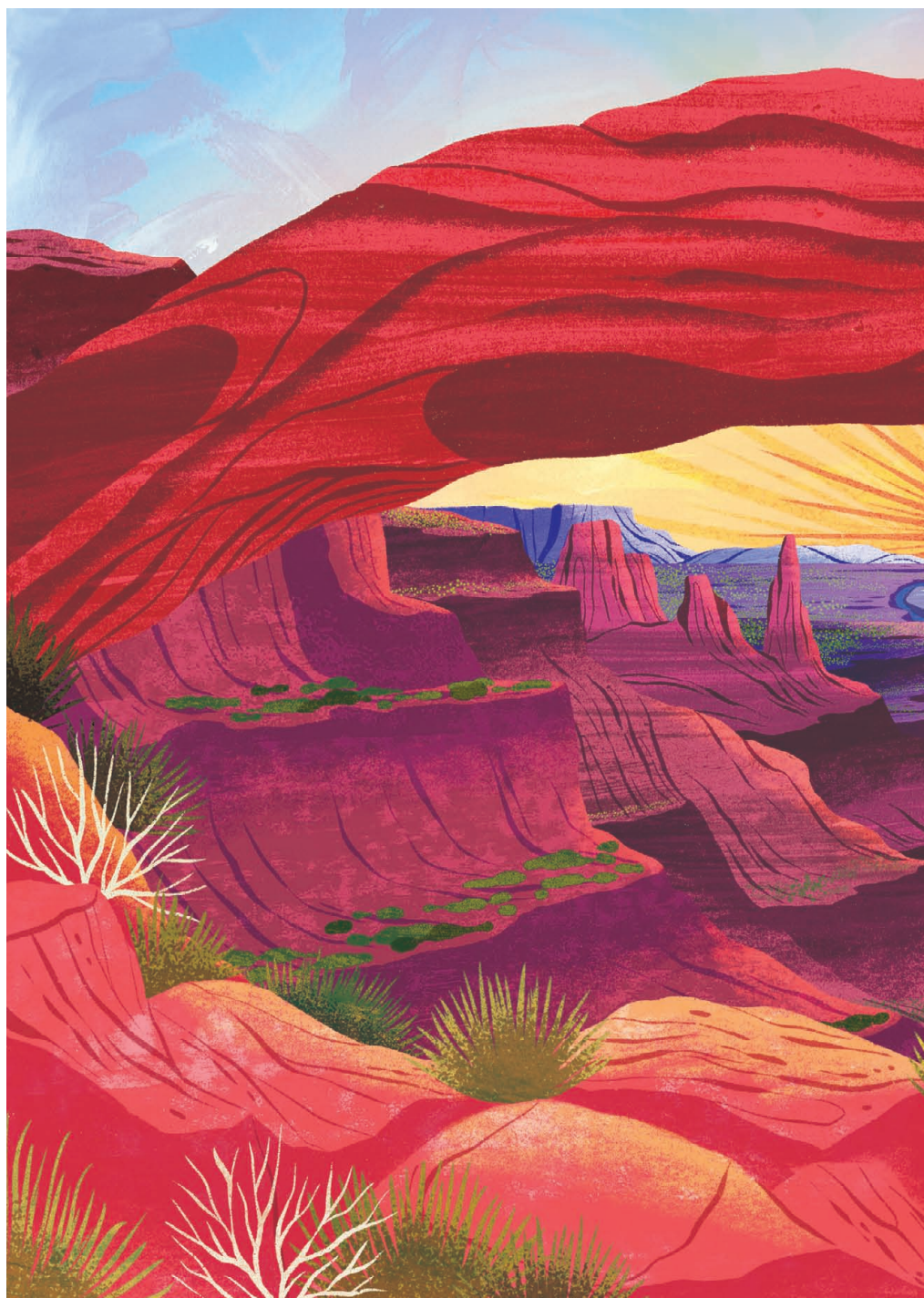
CANYONLANDS

THERE'S NO rule book for this place – it's red rock run rampant. As if a giant sculptor, overcome with creativity, has left his off-cuts and experiments strewn about the desert floor. This is an outdoor gallery of all sorts: of mesas, buttes and chasms, of elegant arches and barely balancing boulders, of sandstone that billows into mushrooms, soars like church spires or looks like nothing of this world. It's geology run wild . . .

Southern Utah is a fantastically feral place. Here, on the Colorado Plateau, planet earth is at its rawest; ripped open and revealed. Rock strata read like tree rings, recounting the epochs – the subsiding and upheavals and the orogenics and erosions of millions of years – in a flourish of formations. There are several protected areas across the state, but none is bigger, or more carnivalesque, than Canyonlands National Park.

The park is dazzlingly diverse. There are the namesake canyons, yes, but they're mixed up with a hotchpotch of hoodoos and buttes, fault-lines and unconformities, synclines and anticlines, Chocolate Drops and Elephant Hills. It's not a sterile environment either. Minute lichens crust the sandstone, cacti and bunch grasses survive and thrive, and tenacious cottonwoods, columbines and monkey flowers scrape out a living in the canyon bottoms. Spring sees a wildflower explosion – Indian paintbrush, blue-purple scorpionweed, sego lilies, cliffrose. Dawn and dusk bring out the mule deer, jackrabbits, porcupines and coyotes, plus a chorus of songbirds; the nightlife is lively, with darkness heralding skunks and foxes, bats and bobcats, even mountain lions.







The park is arranged around the Y-shaped confluence of the mighty Green and Colorado Rivers, which divides it into three main sections – each inconveniently cut off from the others. Few roads manage to infiltrate this rugged land; it's at least a 100-mile drive to travel between the park's sectors, even if they can seem close enough to touch.

In the north, atop the high mesa in the wedge of the Y, is the Island in the Sky, where the land plummets in long, sheer drops and the views are extraordinary. Only a short drive from the outdoorsy town of Moab, this is Canyonlands at its most accessible, and the majority of people who visit the park come here, to watch blazing sunrises erupt from cliff-edge Mesa Arch or to gaze over everything from Grand View Point.

To the southeast is The Needles, where multi-hued spires of Cedar Mesa sandstone surge up amid secret meadows. This is tougher country, with longer trails and even fewer amenities. And then, to the west, there's The Maze, an over-sized three-dimensional puzzle of arid, intertwined, mind-bending canyons that veer off and dead-end with merry abandon. Only a few hardy adventurers brave it – around 2,000 a year compared to the 264,000 who visit Island in the Sky. Permits are essential. But what magic awaits those who do. The utter silence of the desert; the quasi-religious euphoria as the day's first rays erupt on landscape that seems to be yours alone.

It's never been an easy place to exist. The first humans known to visit Canyonlands, more than 10,000 years ago, were nomadic hunter-gatherers who simply passed through in search of edible plants and big game. It was only around 5,000 years ago that people began to come more regularly, using it as a seasonal home; Horseshoe Canyon, an outlying section of the national park, is rich in rock art from this time. As farming became more widespread a few communities settled. In The Needles' Salt Creek Canyon the remains of Ancestral Puebloan granaries can be seen. However, the area was abandoned around AD 1300, possibly due to changes in the climate making life here just too tough.

It remains harsh. Summer temperatures are punishing, though nights are chilly. Water is hard to come by – though monsoon rains cause flash floods. There are few roads, fewer services, only a couple of campsites. It's a wilderness that's mesmerising to visit, but in which it's dangerous to remain.



Where? British Columbia, Canada

What? Vast virgin wilderness,
haunted by a mystical
beast

GREAT BEAR RAINFOREST

THERE ARE ghosts in this forest. Of course there are, swirling around the spruce and cedars that have grown here for 1,000 years. The whole place feels alive and ancient: dripping, mouldering, regrowing, decaying, exhaling. The very pulse of nature; the breath of a billion trees. Shoots spring from moss growing on branches, growing off trunks that surge from the great humus of the forest floor. Sit still long enough and surely it will swallow you too – a creeping verdure, subsuming you into its roots. And while you sit, sniff: it's the sweet smell of Mother Earth herself; the musk of her magnificent machinations, which create everything from the most delicate herbs to the wailing loons to the breaching whales. And, of course, the ghosts themselves . . .

Canada's Great Bear Rainforest is about the size of Ireland, and probably twice as green. Around a quarter of the world's coastal temperate rainforest is sequestered here, along the Pacific seaboard of British Columbia, in an immense swathe spreading from Knight Inlet to the Alaska Panhandle. This is a wilderness of venerable Sitka spruce, red cedar and Douglas firs, of hemlock, pine and yew. Amid the trees spring bog cranberry, copper bush and Nootka rose, trailing kinnikinnick, devil's club and stink currant. Also, mosses thrive, in many forms – bent-leaf and cat-tail, lanky and slender-beaked, fat-bog and frizzled pincushion – alongside the liverworts and the lichens, the slime moulds and the fungi.

This brilliant biodiversity is a result of an unusual location. Four tectonic plates collide here, interacting to form a complex make-up of rugged mountains, inlets, fjords, channels, islands and skerries,







while warm, wet Pacific winds crash into the Coast Range, providing an abundance of fog and rain. The seas, too, are rich in nutrients, stirred up by competing currents. The result: a fecund wilderness, well watered, exploding with life.

Indeed, this 'Amazon of the North' is home to an array of creatures. Humpbacks the size of buses come feasting in summer and autumn, while family pods of orca might be spotted year-round. Huge harems of seals and sea lions make almighty dins on rocky haul-outs, while porpoises perform acrobatics in the waves and sea otters feast on their backs, balancing crabs and clams on their bellies. Coastal wolves – genetically distinct, and slightly smaller than their grey brethren – pad silently along the shoreline, searching for prey and, if need be, swimming huge distances between islands to hunt; they're rarely seen, but their haunting howls are frequently heard. Big-eared Sitka deer nibble the lichen, and squirrels, minks and martens dash along the boughs. And there are bears – hulking grizzlies and smaller black bears – often to be found, in salmon-spawning season, prowling the rivers and streams, plucking fat fish from the torrents with a quick, expert flick of their fearsome claws.

A handful of these bears stand out from the rest, though are less often spied: these are the Kermode or spirit bears. These rare, cream-coloured ursines, found almost exclusively in the Great Bear Rainforest – especially around Princess Royal Island and Gribbell Island – are not a type of polar bear. Nor are they albino – they have dark eyes and noses. They are a variant of the black bear, with a rare mutation of the gene involved in melanin production responsible for their distinctive blonde coats. To be born white, a bear must inherit the recessive mutation from both parents, who might be black themselves; current estimates suggest the number of spirit bears is anywhere between 50 and 400. It's thought the mutation persists as it makes the bears better hunters: as they loom over the water, their light hue makes them less visible to their fishy prey.

They've long been thought special by the Kitasoo/Xai'xais, the Gitga'a't and the 13 other tribes of the Tsimshian Nation, who share their traditional lands with the animal they call *moksgm'ol* (ghost bear). The Tsimshian never hunted them; even speaking of this rare apparition was taboo. Their legends tell of Raven, the creator of all things, who descended during the last Ice Age to make the world green; he asked the Black Bear to turn one in every ten cubs white,

to serve as a reminder of when the world was covered in snow and ice – a reminder to be thankful for the new, lush, bounteous lands. Raven set aside a special area, now known as the Great Bear Rainforest, for these creatures; this would be a remote haven where the bears could live in peace.

That was the hope. But the modern world began to infiltrate even here, the trees attracting commercial loggers capable of flattening an entire 10,000-year-old virgin forest in the blink of an eye. Fortunately, in 2016, the Great Bear Rainforest Agreement rendered 85 per cent of the area legally protected (with the remaining 15 per cent subject to logging under only strict conditions). This act has helped to safeguard the future of the entire planet – more than 1,000 tonnes of carbon are stored in a single hectare of coastal rainforest, making it a vital defence against climate change. The act also preserves the territories of the resident First Nations communities and gives them the right to contribute to decisions on the rainforest's future. And, of course, it protects the home of the rarest, most magical of bears.





Where? Yucatán, Mexico

What? Glorious semi-underground pools, essential to life and death

YUCATÁN

ABOVE GROUND the sun pounds. But beneath the region's tropical cloak, through craggy holes worn into the leachy stone, lies another world. An aqueous abyss, carved out over centuries. Down here, pools of cool green-blue – water so clear it plays tricks on the senses – pock the underland in their thousands, no two quite alike but each linked to another, and another, and another. It is a chasmic labyrinth of pellucid channels flowing below the scenes; a source of vital sustenance for those above; and a place of connection to the dead, who have passed to the spirit world down below . . .

The Yucatán is a porous place, a geological Swiss cheese of soft limestone, frilled in leafy jungle. It was not always so: millions of years ago, this peninsula poking into the Gulf of Mexico was largely a vast coral reef, submerged beneath the ocean. But as water levels fluctuated, the reef was eventually exposed; gradually, acidic rain nibbled away, dissolving the rocks, gnawing passageways through the karst, creating an extensive cave network – one of the longest in the world.

Over time, further erosion has provided humans with windows into this subterranean wilderness. In places, the ground has collapsed into the water-filled caves, creating sheer-sided cenotes, or sinkholes, a term derived from the Mayan word *ts'ono'ot*, meaning 'well'. Today, there are around 8,000 of them, widely varied in style and scale. Some of them are small and shallow; others stretch the length of football fields or plunge tens of metres deep. Some – like Cenote Azul, near Tulum – are fully exposed to the elements, their rock roofs eroded away leaving pretty open-air emerald pools behind.



Others – like atmospheric Cenote Samulá, outside Valladolid – remain almost completely concealed underground, with only a rickety staircase facilitating access and a trapdoor-size slit allowing any outside light in. Within these more secretive caverns bats flap in the semi-dark and the glassy water is bracing-cold, out of sight of the warming sun. Stalactites drip from the rugged domed ceilings, stalagmites soar up to meet them, lianas creep at the sides, and ancient artefacts – broken pots, shards of jade, bits of bone – can sometimes be found sunken at the bottom.

For the Maya people the cenotes were everything. In a land of no natural over-ground rivers or streams, they were a vital source of fresh water – being able to access this precious commodity is what enabled the mighty civilisation to flourish at all. The Maya built their settlements near, and even on top of, cenotes: for instance, at their mighty city of Chichén Itzá, four are visible (including sacred Cenote Sagrado) while Kukulcán, the site's main temple, sits above a hidden sinkhole.

But these pools were not only of practical use. The Maya believed they were gateways to Xibalba, the underworld, a frightful realm ruled by dark gods and demons. Thus cenotes were at the very centre of Maya religion because they were where life and death came close enough to touch.

Chaac, the god of rain and storms, and ruler of cenotes and caves, was among the Maya's most revered beings. He was said to pour water from the skies and keep it underground in earthenware jars. The Maya would pray to this long-nosed deity, hoping he might strike the clouds and deliver life-giving rain for their crops; they would throw offerings, and even human sacrifices, into the cenotes to try to assure his grace and favour.

While some cenotes are more like exotic swimming pools these days, with snack bars tucked amid the dangling vines, others have a less tame, more tangled air. Cool and quiet, with soaring roofs and seraphic shards of light, they feel less like caves than cathedrals – natural places of worship in the wilds, where you can swim with cichlids and catfish, and with the spirits of the past.



Where? Ecuador

What? Extraordinary archipelago, central to evolutionary theory

GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

THERE'S NO archipelago so outrageously original as this. Where the land still seems to fizz beneath your feet, and where you'll find the strangest menagerie of beasts, so tame and yet so wild. For where else can you step onto a blinding-white beach and walk amid a slob-out of sea lions so unfazed they don't twitch a whisker? Where can you dive with a hundred-strong shiver of sharks? Where can you happen upon huge reptiles that might have been alive during the First World War? Where can you encounter lizards that swim, seabirds that dance, others that cannot fly at all and penguins hanging out on the equator? It's a motley, magnificent crew that not only defies belief but also changed the world . . .

The Galápagos archipelago is a raw and cantankerous place. Comprising 13 main islands, plus an assortment of rocky islets, the lie of the land here is characterised by shield volcanoes, burnt and blackened lava flows, dry palo santo forest, prickly pear cacti and lurid pops of colour – ocean turquoise, crab orange, flamingo pink.

The Galápagos is far adrift in the Pacific Ocean, some 1,000km (620 miles) west of mainland Ecuador and the South American continent, in a lively location. It straddles the equator and sits atop the Galápagos hotspot, at the confluence of three ocean currents, near the point where three tectonic plates meet. The constant undersea shifts and ructions, the onward geomorphological grind, make this one of the most volatile sites on the planet. New volcanoes are under creation all the time: while the oldest of the islands, easternmost Española and San Cristóbal, are thought to be between three and five million years old, westerly Isabela is scarcely







aged 700,000 – a blip in geological time – and is still being formed; its Sierra Negra volcano is one of the largest and most active in the archipelago.

All of this adds up to a singular place, with unique conditions, where the animal life that's managed to reach this remote outpost has been able to develop and adapt in splendid isolation. Indeed, it's believed humans didn't discover the Galápagos until 1535, and then quite by accident: Fray Tomás de Berlanga, then Bishop of Panama, was on his way to Peru when his ship was swept off course. He wasn't impressed, finding the islands parched and inhospitable, with earth 'like slag' and creatures 'so silly that they do not know how to flee'.

The 17th-century British buccaneer William Dampier visited too, and was mainly concerned with the tortoises – 'so extraordinary large and fat,' he wrote 'and so sweet that no pullet eats more pleasantly'. In the 1840s, author Herman Melville passed by while working aboard a whaling ship and 'doubted whether any spot on earth can, in desolateness, furnish a parallel to this group'.

However, it was the notes of 19th-century naturalist Charles Darwin that had the greatest effect. In his work, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, he called the Galápagos 'a little world within itself' noting that, 'by far the most remarkable feature . . . is that the different islands to a considerable extent are inhabited by a different set of beings . . .'

Of course, it was in part his time on the Galápagos, specifically his observations of the mockingbirds and the various types of finches, with their various beak shapes and sizes, that spurred Darwin to formulate his theory of evolution by natural selection. Looking at these tiny dull-hued birds flitting about the treetops now – from the small tree finch, with its distinctive curved beak, to the tool-using woodpecker finch – it's hard to countenance just what insurrection they sparked. An earth-shaking idea that changed the way we think about creation.

But you need not know a single thing about genetics to 'get' the Galápagos. Simply, it's one of the world's best places to go for wildlife, overrun as it is with creatures both completely unafraid and brilliantly weird.

Take the iguanas. That they're here at all is frankly miraculous – it's thought that, at an unknown point in prehistory, a common ancestor must have floated here on a raft of some kind from South

America; now, large mustard-yellow and rarer pink land iguanas skulk around the cacti while coal-black marine iguanas dive for seaweed and sunbathe in grotesque piles, snorting saltwater out of their nostrils. The nutrient-rich seas are also filled with whales and dolphins, green turtles, unusually north-roaming penguins and huge schools of hammerhead sharks. Then there are the birds: elegant waved albatross lovers performing jousts with their bills, clown-like blue-footed boobies hot-stepping to impress their mates, pugilistic frigate birds inflating their crimson throat pouches and stunted-wing flightless cormorants that seem so ungainly until you see them slip underwater, using their powerful legs to deep-dive for octopus and eels. Intense red-blue Sally Lightfoot crabs (so-called, it's claimed, after a Caribbean dancer) scuttle with supreme agility; the large and venerable giant tortoises are rather slower, but give the archipelago its name – *galapágo* is an old Spanish word for 'tortoise'.

It all seems too strange to exist. And yet it does. Proof of the beauty, the diversity and the endless possibility, when nature is left to its own selection.

Where? Potaro-Siparuni, Guyana

What? Formidable plume
plunging into thick
rainforest

KAIETEUR FALLS

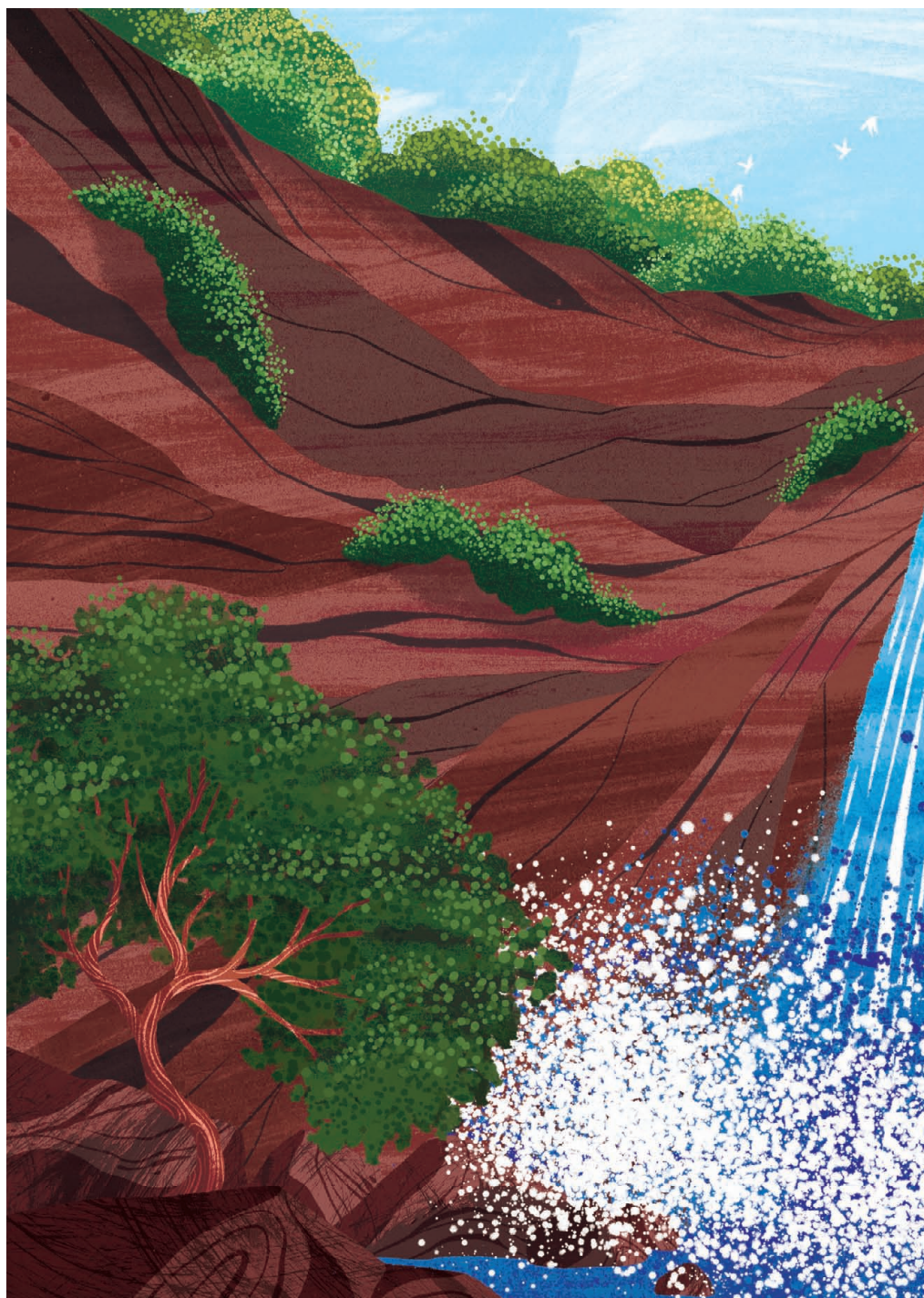
THE COLOSSAL cascade rages in the jungle. The wildest jungle. A ceaseless canopy of green that stretches every which way and beyond, in bold defiance of a deforesting planet. The waterfall stirs up this rampant foliage, tumbling on a gargantuan scale. Gallon upon gallon of river, thundering with force and fury. But it's a drama played out largely for the birds, far from roads or cities. Wild waters indeed . . .

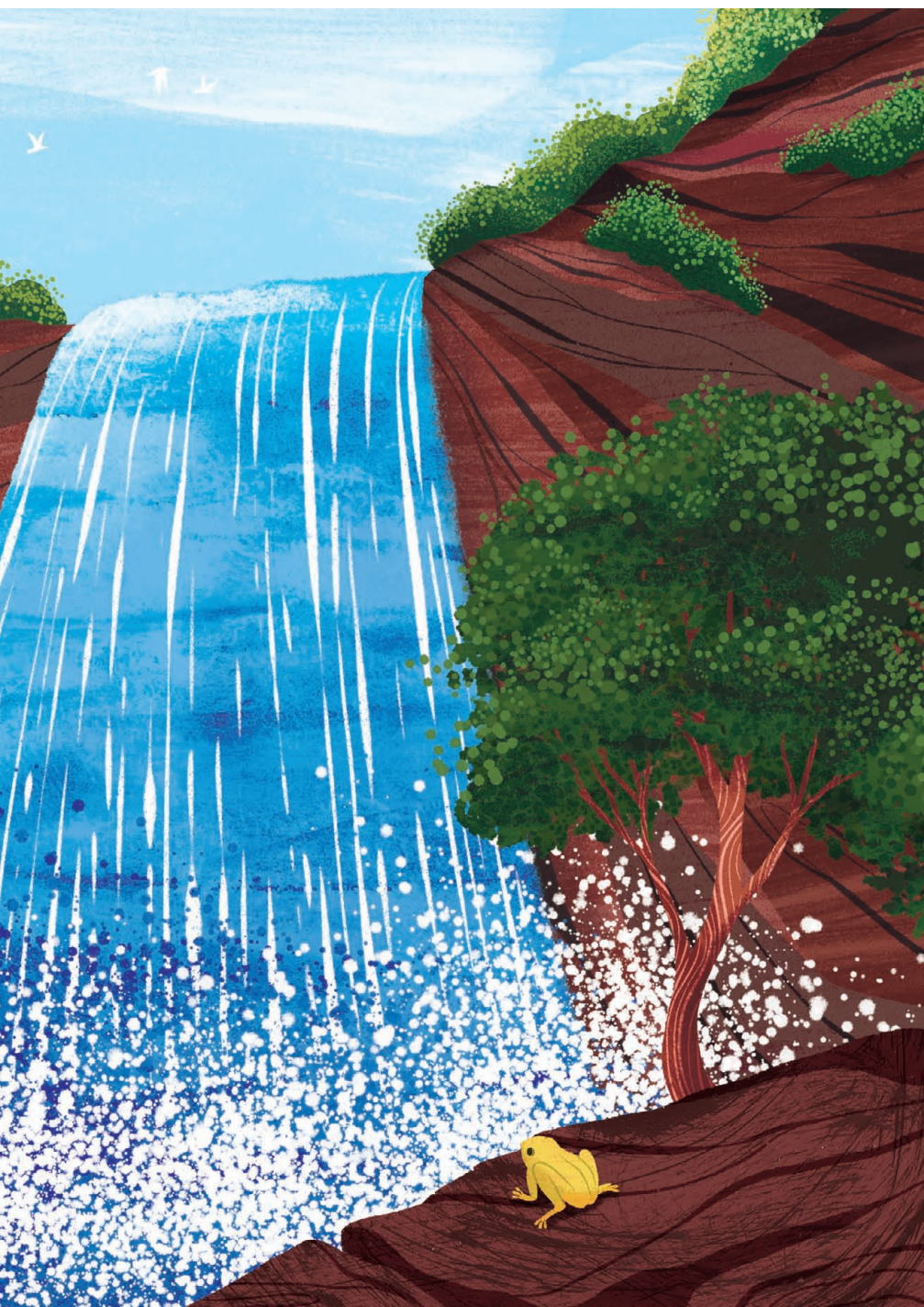
At 226m (741ft), Kaieteur Falls is about four times higher than North America's Niagara, twice Africa's Victoria. After the rains, when the banks of the Potaro River are at their fullest, around 23,000 cubic feet of water per second gushes over this sheer precipice, making Kaieteur one of the largest and most powerful single-drop waterfalls around. It's an uncommon combination: a very tall falls on a very high-volume river, in a very remote spot.

The Potaro is a tributary of the Essequibo – the mightiest watercourse between the Orinoco and the Amazon. It sweeps across the Guiana Shield, a vast upland of two-billion-year-old rock, table-top *tepui* mountains and rampant biodiversity that is one of the few large intact areas of rainforest left in the world. This is a wilderness vital to the planet, harbouring species found nowhere else (and probably plenty yet to be described) as well as helping in the battle against global warming: the Shield stores around 18 per cent of the world's tropical forest carbon.

The importance of Kaieteur and its surrounds has been recognised ever since its 'discovery' by European explorers in 1870. In 1929 the British Colonial Administration (in charge of British Guiana at the time) designated a sizeable area around the Falls as a







national park – one of the first such acts of protection in Latin America. Regrettably, the park was downsized in the 1970s to facilitate mining concessions; however, by the 1990s this situation had been redressed. Now, the Falls reside inside a much larger protected region.

It is Guyana's only national park, and the country's biggest attraction in every sense. But, thanks to its remoteness – though only 100-odd miles inland from capital Georgetown, no roads lead to Kaieteur Falls; the only access is by long hike or a small plane – it remains undeveloped and relatively unseen. There are no tourist shops on the riverbanks, no hand rails at the lookouts. Here, you can crawl on your belly right to the very edge of certain death, to gaze way down into the broiling stew. The water roars and the jungle shrieks, croaks, squawks and rustles. But other sounds – human sounds – are few and far between.

There are a few handfuls of people hereabouts. Indeed, it was the Patamona Amerindians, who've long lived along the waterway, who gave the cascade its name – 'Kai' being one of their legendary chiefs and 'teur' a local word for 'falls'. It's said that, in order to save his village from a neighbouring tribe, Kai sacrificed himself to the great spirit, Makonaima, by paddling over the edge; they say his canoe was turned into the long, pointed rock still visible at the bottom, and that Kai himself still lives in a cave behind the cascade. The swifts that accompanied his fatal plunge have stayed with him, and can be seen screeching in their thousands at dusk, as they flock to his hideaway to roost.

The ghost of the chief isn't the only resident of Kaieteur. Walks in the vicinity provide hold-your-breath views of the mighty drop and the rainbows that form in its mists, but also encounters with giant tank bromeliads, metallic-blue tarantula, gaudy orange cock-of-the-rock birds performing their flamboyant courtships and golden rocket frogs, no bigger than a fingernail. Tiny treasures living alongside a colossal water feature, in the most prodigious wilderness.



Where? British Overseas Territory,
Atlantic Ocean

What? South Pole-pushing
outpost of raucous wildlife
and remarkable tales

SOUTH GEORGIA

NO TREES. No people. No neighbours for hundreds of miles. But, my, what sights, smells, sounds and stories! Stranded in the midst of the southern Atlantic, this forbidding crescent-shaped isle – sharp-toothed, ice-licked, wind-blasted – is full of life. Teeming. Stinking. Seething. Offshore waters as full and rich as bouillabaisse. Bays overrun by penguins. Beaches galumphed by blubberous seals. Skies a-flurry with birds. And reminders of the hardy human souls who made their marks down here, for good or ill ...

South Georgia is a long way from anywhere. More than 2,000km (1,240 miles) east of southern South America but still almost as far again from Antarctica itself, this island gateway to the great White Continent seems to exist in a separate realm – one of icebergs, whales and seabirds, of exploration, desecration and heroic derring-do. Indeed, around 170km long and, at most, 40km wide (105 miles by 25 miles), South Georgia is small but mighty, with a formidable mountainous spine, deep-cut fjords, a thick glacial carapace, a noisy bunch of residents and a slight but dramatic history.

The island was first sighted, it's believed, by English merchant Antoine de la Roché in 1675 – he was sailing home from Peru and his ship was blown off course as it rounded Cape Horn. It wasn't until a century later that the first mariner stepped ashore: in 1775, on his voyage in search of the rumoured southern landmass of Terra Australis Incognita, Captain James Cook claimed South Georgia for the British (naming it after King George III). He deemed it 'savage', with little potential, but did note the profusion of seals.



This piqued the interest of many a commercial expedition and, by 1825, it was estimated 1.2 million of the island's seals had been slaughtered and skinned for their pelts. Later, it was whalers who ravaged the surrounding seas. The first whaling station was set up on South Georgia, at Grytviken, in 1904, and the island quickly became the industry's epicentre. Boats armed with grenade-tipped harpoons decimated local whale populations; the hunting only stopped in the 1960s when there were too few whales left to make it worthwhile.

But nature, if allowed, can right itself. First, seal numbers made a quick comeback; some beaches on South Georgia are now thick with sprawled-out fur seals or flabby elephant seals, boisterous males slapping chests in attempts to win a harem. In more recent years, numbers of right, humpback and even blue whales – hunted into near oblivion hereabouts – are also beginning to resurge. And then there are the penguins, which waddle on regardless. At Salisbury Plain, where the outwash of seeping glaciers meets the ocean swell, around 60,000 – maybe 100,000 – king penguins gather in a pungent rabble, tuxedo-smart adults tending brown fluff-ball chicks. The Antarctic Treaty insists visitors must keep their distance but no one's told the penguins; sit still and the curious birds will likely approach for a closer look.

While getting to South Georgia isn't simple – the only way is by slow and stomach-churning expedition cruise – it's at least more comfortable these days than it was for Ernest Shackleton. During the explorer's 1914–16 South Pole expedition, his ship, the *Endurance*, became stuck in sea ice and his crew subsequently marooned on Elephant Island. So Shackleton and five men sailed some 1,300km (700 nautical miles) in a tiny lifeboat, across the tempestuous Southern Ocean, miraculously making it to South Georgia's south coast. Three of the men then trekked for 36 hours, over the island's perilous peaks, to raise the alarm at Stromness whaling station on the north shore. Shackleton's entire crew were rescued; not a man was lost.

Shackleton died on a later Antarctic expedition in 1922. His body is buried at Grytviken cemetery, near the Norwegian church and amid the abandoned whalers' warehouses and scuttled ships. It's a place to celebrate one man's remarkable triumph but also to remember mankind's greed; to relish the rusting away as nature begins again.



SARAH BAXTER grew up in Norfolk, England and now lives in Bath. Her passion for travel and the great outdoors saw her traverse Asia, Australia, New Zealand and the United States before settling into a writing career.

She was Associate Editor of *Wanderlust* magazine, the bible for independent-minded travellers, for more than ten years and has also written extensively on travel for a diverse range of other publications, including the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph* and the *Independent* newspapers. Sarah has contributed to more than a dozen Lonely Planet guidebooks and is the author of four books in the *Inspired Traveller's Guide* series, *Spiritual Places*, *Literary Places*, *Hidden Places* and *Mystical Places*, as well as *A History of the World in 500 Walks* and *A History of the World in 500 Railway Journeys*.

AMY GRIMES is an illustrator based in London. Particularly inspired by nature and the natural patterns found there, Amy's work often features bright and bold illustrated motifs, floral icons and leafy landscapes. As well as working on design and publishing commissions, Amy has an illustrated brand selling prints, textiles and stationery under the name of Hello Grimes.

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